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MELANTHE;

OR,

THE DAYS OF THE MEDICI.

A Tale of the Fifteenth Century.

BY

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CHAPTER I.

THERE are days when every thing in Nature seems to wear a smile of peculiar brightness—when the air is more sweet, the song of the birds more glad, and even the murmur of the stream more gentle, as if hushed by the spirit of content and joy breathing from earth and heaven. Such hours, telling of the mighty influence of Nature, and Nature's God, speak directly to the heart. None can experience them, and yet remain unmoved; the soul lifts itself humbly to its Divine Creator; the happy are more grateful, and the sorrowful are soothed. But what are such hours of peace and brightness to him, whose breast is

torn by the fierceness of passion, by the galling sense of injury, or the base desire of revenge? They are hours of torture, more exquisite in their poignancy, than if the victim were writhing at the stake. The calm without but mocks the misery within; and each semblance of joy in Nature, strikes with a double pang upon the heart tainted by envy, or lacerated by remorse.

Bitter and keen were these thoughts, as they filled the dark mind of Luca Pitti, who, with his arms strongly drawn, rather than folded across his breast, stood upon the heights of Fiesole, and looked down upon the city of Florence. The delicious fragrance of the mountain air passed unheeded over his fevered brow; his eyes were strained, as if, amidst the white walls of the city of palaces which gleamed through the rich glow of sunset, he would have singled out some object; and it seemed as though he had succeeded, for a smile of bitterness lighted up his countenance, and a muttered imprecation burst from his lips, as he shook his clenched hand towards the magnificent woods which surrounded the villa of the Medici, near Fiesole.

The house was just visible from the spot where Luca Pitti stood; and he turned from the sight with a look of loathing, and advanced a few steps nearer to the brow of the hill; but, as if his very soul sickened at the gladness of the sunlight, he hastily drew his cap over his eyes, and strode down the road before him. He had not proceeded far, when there broke upon the air a sound which kindled anew the fury that raged within his breast; and, as though stung by some sudden impulse, he leaped from the path he was pursuing, and concealed himself in a thicket of evergreens, within a few paces of the road.

Throwing himself upon the ground, with his teeth set fast, and his eyes glaring like those of a fiend, he looked upon the gay multitude which swept past, while at every cry of "Viva! Viva!—Viva Lorenzo!—Viva Giuliano!—*Palle, Palle, Vivan' i Medici!" which rent the air, a groan of rage burst from his bosom.

The people were returning from a tournament, given by Lorenzo de' Medici, to commemorate the

* Palle, Palle! The armorial bearings of the house of Medici being three golden balls.

escape of his beloved father, Piero de' Medici, from an attempt at assassination, which had occurred a short time previously. Who had been the instigator of that attempt still remained a secret ; but the young Lorenzo, by his prudence and foresight, having averted the danger, disdained to bring to light the author of an outrage which all appeared unanimously to hold in abhorrence ; and resolving to be more upon his guard for the future, had dismissed the angry crowd who clamoured for revenge, saying mildly, " He knows not how to govern, who knows not how to forgive."

And he did forgive his enemies :—but there was one to whose breast forgiveness or gratitude were strangers ; and that one was Luca Pitti, who now, as he gazed through the leafy screen which concealed him, felt that he only hated still more bitterly the man who had so magnanimously pardoned him. How his heart swelled with rage, as he listened to the words of the happy citizens, who, enchanted with the amusement of the day, were loud in their praises of the magnificence by which the acts of their patrons were distinguished, but particularly those of the young Lorenzo, whose

liberality was unbounded. Each word was a dagger to the breast of the envious Luca Pitti ; and as the joyous crowd passed on, with the gay song and the merry laugh, he gnashed his teeth with rage.

The whole population of Florence had flocked to the tilting ground, and now the road from the villa was covered with a moving mass of light-hearted beings. For a few moments, the crowd was stationary ; and then a cry of joy, which rent the heavens, broke from the multitude, and the heart of Luca Pitti well nigh burst with fury, on beholding the object of his hatred within a few paces of the place of his concealment.

Lorenzo, and his young brother, Giuliano, were returning to the city, surrounded by a number of their friends, and superbly mounted and equipped. The two brothers slackened their pace as they perceived that the people stood to allow them to pass ; and doffing their plumed and jewelled caps, returned the greetings of their fellow citizens with a grace and kindness which went straight to every heart. “ Viva ! Viva ! Vivan’ i Medici ! ” — “ Viva Lorenzo, Viva il buon Piero ! ” burst from every side.

“E il bel Giuliano,” cried some women, as Giuliano, who was renowned for his beauty, passed close to them, and rewarded their admiration by a smile, which still further enhanced the superb expression of his countenance. And the gallant train moved on, the plumes of the riders waved in the distance, the cheers of the loving and delighted crowd grew more faint, and Luca Pitti found himself alone—maddened by the secret consciousness of baffled treachery, and burning for revenge!

CHAPTER II.

THE power and popularity of the Medici had long been a subject of jealousy to many of the most important families of Florence. More than one attempt had been made, in order to free the city from the domination of Cosmo de' Medici ; yet notwithstanding that he had suffered banishment, from the jealousy of his fellow citizens, the talents and virtues of this great man so far prevailed over the factious envy of the Florentine nobles, that he was restored to the post he had so worthily filled, and at his death transmitted the government of the republic of Florence to his son, Piero.

It might have been supposed that gratitude towards the memory of one, who had, by his wise and virtuous administration, placed their city at the head of the Italian republics, would have prompted the zeal of the Florentines towards a more generous support of the family to which they

owed so much ; but the littleness of the mind of man has from time immemorial interposed between him and the furtherance of his best interests. Instead of a cordial support and co-operation with Piero, many of the nobles secretly united against him, and endeavoured to undermine his authority.

One of the great sources of the power of the Medici was their enormous wealth. Cosmo, fully aware of this advantage, had lost no opportunity of improving it. He was the richest citizen in the world ; and not only did he engage in commercial transactions to an extent almost incredible, but he also contrived, by large and well arranged loans, to propitiate most of the reigning sovereigns of Europe. But it was not only at a distance that Cosmo had employed his riches—most of the chief families in Florence were indebted to him for sums which they imagined would never be required of them ; and it was not until the death of Cosmo they were reminded that what they had hitherto considered a gift, was in reality merely a loan.

Prompted by the treacherous advice of a false friend, Dietisalvo Neroni, Piero de' Medici had no sooner succeeded to the government of Florence,

than he announced his intention of calling in the various sums which had been lent by his father, giving as a reason that his commercial relations were upon too extended a scale. Although no one could arraign the justice of this act, it was immediately productive of the pernicious effects which the insidious Neroni had anticipated. The Florentine nobles found it very inconvenient to repay what they had borrowed; and although they did not dare openly to proclaim their dissatisfaction, a spirit of rebellion spread darkly amongst them, and a whisper arose as to why one family of citizens should thus elevate themselves above the rest, and rule with sovereign sway in a city where all ought to be equals? The question might have been easily answered—because to the family whose grandeur had become a subject of the meanest envy, was the city of Florence indebted for the high place she now enjoyed in the estimation of other states.

Commerce, arts, and literature—the refinements of luxury, the spirit of chivalry, and the noble feeling of self-sacrifice to the public welfare—all had

sprung into life at the bidding of the Medici ; all that had slumbered during the darkness of past ages, awoke at the generous call of those Citizen Princes, whose country was their glory and their pride, and whose name, while the world endures, will be the glory and the pride of their country.

Although there were not wanting many who could fully appreciate the merits of the Medici, still a formidable body of malcontents existed in the city, chiefly amongst those whose elevated situation rendered them aspirants to the power they longed to wrest from the hands which grasped it. The secret conferences of the disaffected had been many and deep, although hitherto unavailing, for the power of Cosmo had been too firmly fixed, being based upon the confidence and affection of the people : but as soon as Piero, by the unwise act of calling in his debts, had excited the murmurs of many who had formerly been most loud in their declarations of friendship, the hopes of the conspirators began to rise, and a more definitive plan of operation than had hitherto been attempted, was agreed upon—this was, the assassination of the

unsuspecting Piero, whilst yet his sons Lorenzo and Giuliano were too young to undertake the cares of government.

All was arranged with apparent promise of success. The bad health of Piero offered peculiar advantages for the execution of their treacherous designs; for, being unable to mount his horse, he was generally carried in a chair by his servants. After due deliberation they fixed upon the moment when, returning from his country seat, Piero should enter the city from the northern side. As the time approached, the soldiers of the Marquis de Ferrara, who had been stationed in the neighbourhood, by the orders of the conspirators, advanced so as to hem in the whole party, when the life of the destined victim was providentially preserved by the very person whose tender years had been deemed a security for his non-interference.

The young Lorenzo, ever watchful of a parent he adored, had ridden forward in advance of the scanty train which accompanied his father; and meeting some soldiers whom he knew to belong to
• a foreign state, his acute mind instantly penetrated

the device with which they endeavoured to lull him into security. Feigning to enter into conversation with them, he carelessly informed them that his father was following at a short distance ; and at the same time contrived to detach one of his followers who, unperceived by the soldiers, dived into the forest by the way side, and hastening to Piero, led him in safety by another and more circuitous path to the city ; while Lorenzo, without exhibiting the smallest sign of fear, passed unmolested through the hostile troops, nor paused, nor spoke, until he stood by the side of his father in the Council hall, surrounded by the officers and magistrates, whom he had hastily summoned.

Then, with an undaunted air, did he proclaim the treason which had been meditated, and slowly glancing round the assembly, inquired what should be the fate of those whose treacherous hearts had instigated such an attempt? With one voice a sentence of immediate death was pronounced ; and such was the terror which the firmness of Lorenzo inspired, that many of the conspirators threw themselves on their knees before the heroic youth,

whose presence of mind had saved the life of his parent, and, confessing their treacherous intention, implored for mercy.

It was then that the gentle and generous nature of Lorenzo suggested the answer, which fell like a double condemnation upon the hearts of the still concealed traitors. It was then that the dark and narrow soul of Luca Pitti first burned with a personal hatred towards the noble youth before whom he stood, and that he conceived the project of a still deeper vengeance; for at the very moment that his fawning tongue proclaimed his grief for the danger of his friend, and abhorrence of the meditated crime, the calm eye of the young Lorenzo had read him to the heart, and the conscious traitor felt that, though pardoned, he was discovered, and despised.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN Luca Pitti, recovering from the abstraction into which the reflections consequent upon the appearance of the Medici, returning as it were in triumph from the tournament, had led him, again bent his steps towards the city of Florence, the moon shed her calm light upon all around. The sky was cloudless, and the stillness of the air, only broken by the gay songs of the happy people, who yet lingered in the open streets, and by the side of the Arno, unwilling to close a day, which had been to them one of unbounded joy and excitement. With slow and measured steps, Luca Pitti continued to advance, his head almost bowed upon his breast, and apparently insensible to all around; yet not a sound, not a word escaped him; while at every demonstration of joy which reached him, he gnashed his teeth in bitterness of spirit; for the acclamations which proclaimed the triumph of his rivals

over their enemies, were as if his own condemnation had been uttered by the whole people. His coward heart sunk within him, when he remembered the signal contempt with which public execration had been implied, rather than expressed, towards him, upon the rumour, that he had been one of the secret conspirators whom the generosity of Lorenzo had pardoned. The recollection now seemed to lend wings to his steps, and he hurried forward until, having reached a temporary door in an angle of an unfinished building, he drew forth a key, and in a moment afterwards stood within the walls of a palace of such magnificent proportions, that it appeared better fitted for the abode of a mighty sovereign, than the dwelling of a simple citizen.

Now secure from intrusion, the baffled and degraded traitor gave himself up to all the bitterness of rage and despair, as he contemplated the ruin and disappointment which was the immediate consequence of his crime. It is difficult to imagine that the glorious sentiment of a noble ambition can ever give birth to the black design of treachery ; but even ambition, and the pride of distinction, when carried to excess, become criminal.

This was exemplified in the character and conduct of Luca Pitti. Equal in birth to the Medici, his first impulse had been to gain, as they had done, the estimation of his fellow citizens, by a laudable endeavour to promote the welfare and splendour of their republic ; until yielding, by degrees, to the intoxication of public approval, and the accession of weight and consequence which followed, he began to entertain views of a less honourable nature, nursing in secret the hope of being one day still more highly distinguished, than even the family which he had endeavoured to emulate.

At length, so firmly did the idea of his own importance fix itself in his mind, that all demonstration of public approval bestowed upon others was distorted into an intended insult to himself.

His feelings towards the family of the Medici in particular, assumed the character of a settled and implacable hatred. Far from any open declaration of hostility, he continued for some time apparently on the best terms with them ; and having begun to carry into effect his plan of erecting a palace so superb, that every other building would shrink into insignificance beside it, he did not hesitate to avail

himself of the generosity for which the Medici were so distinguished, and gladly accepted their offers of assistance towards the completion of his magnificent design, his own fortune, although considerable, being found inadequate to defray the expenses of so great an undertaking.

The very marbles, of which the walls were composed, were brought with infinite care and expense from the quarries of the Medici; and when the building began to rise in its splendour, and the grandeur of its proportions filled the mind with visions of its future glory, the spirit of generosity so laudably awakened by the noble acts of Cosmo, and his son Piero de' Medici, seemed as it were with one common thrill to pervade every Florentine bosom.

The completion of the Palace of Luca Pitti became a point of national honour, each citizen vying with the other as to who should contribute most largely towards it. It may appear almost incredible that the undertaking of a private individual should be thus honoured by public interest; but in an age when the encouragement of the arts and the revival of literature were the avowed objects

of the pride of nations ;—when the sovereign*, to whom all the South of Europe looked up as to a model, chose for his armorial bearings an open book and a sculptor's chisel ; when the same sovereign, after the disastrous treaty of Lodi, refrained from further act of hostility, upon receiving from Cosmo de' Medici a finely copied manuscript of Livy ;—it is scarcely surprising, that a state like the Florentine, which had been called by the refined taste and talent of a family of its citizens from the comparative obscurity into which, with the rest of Italy, it had fallen, should hold in high estimation the followers of that newly awakened spirit to which they already owed so much.

The more freedom in a people, the more each citizen is interested in any great undertaking which may contribute to the honour of his country, and the more firmly the hereditary glory that attaches to public virtue or exploits is perpetuated. The subject of a tyrant, only sees in a successful general, an actor who has played the first part in a brilliant spectacle ; but the free citizen beholds in

* Alphonzo, King of Naples, surnamed the Magnanimous.

him his defender, his saviour, and the author of his own glory. The feeling of sympathy and admiration fires every breast, and a name rendered illustrious by a noble action, becomes, in a free people, a national property.

Imbued as were the Florentines with this spirit, the grandeur which marked the conception of Luca Pitti in the design of his palace, at once captivated their imagination. Each citizen appeared to feel that his own honour was at stake; and when it was ascertained that even the large fortune of Luca Pitti must be totally insufficient to carry out the scheme of magnificence which his fancy had traced, every heart was opened, every hand was raised to help him to the completion of his great undertaking. From all sides presents of immense value poured in; the citizens declared that their treasures were better deposited in what they termed a monument of the greatness of their nation, than in their own dwellings; and as soon as the state of the building permitted, Luca Pitti beheld, as if by magic, his walls hung with rare paintings, his galleries lined with statues, and his rooms filled with the richest and most beautiful furniture.

Instead of the pure feeling of gratitude, which should have filled his heart, upon such a demonstration of public and private favour, the aspiring soul of Luca Pitti urged him to climb still higher. The fruit of these ambitious sentiments had been the plot against the life of Piero, so signally defeated by the prudence and ability of his son Lorenzo. The result of the conspiracy had shown to Luca Pitti how futile had been the hope in which he had indulged ; but he was unprepared for the galling and signal vengeance which was inflicted by his fellow citizens upon the miscreant who, in betraying his former friend, had, they felt, been equally perfidious towards themselves.

Although the treachery of Luca Pitti had been as it were suppressed by the magnanimity of the Medici, yet he stood among the people a marked man. Eager to show their detestation of his crime, but a few hours after its discovery had elapsed, when crowds of workmen were seen hurrying to and from his palace, bearing with them, to the houses of their respective owners, the several precious gifts they had a little while before solicited him to accept. Some few endeavoured to conceal

their real meaning, by a pretence of wishing to borrow the things for a short time ; others, by appearing to have only considered them as a loan ; but the bulk of the citizens boldly demanded their property. The word traitor was openly pronounced ; and Luca Pitti—the conscious traitor, the accused, the denounced — shrunk from the contemptuous look his guilty heart traced upon every face ; and, like a wounded tiger, unable to spring upon his foe, lay writhing in impotent fury, neglected and alone.

Now, as he stood within the walls of his palace, the reality of his situation struck with redoubled force upon his mind. The bright moonlight streamed in at the windows, and as he walked through the rooms, the magnificence of which had been the theme of every tongue, and which he hoped would have transmitted his name with honour and renown to succeeding generations, he gnashed his teeth with rage. From every side the contempt of his fellow citizens seemed to pour upon him afresh—for each spot was connected in his mind with some kind word, or generous act, which had hallowed his undertaking. Where, now,

were all the treasures which a noble heart would have twice valued, as a tribute to worth from the hand of friendship? Gone—all gone;—snatched hurriedly from beneath his roof, as though contamination lurked within the walls: and Luca Pitti, stung to the soul by this bitter proof of the utter contempt in which he was held, hurried on through the empty chambers, until he reached the foot of the grand staircase.

There he suddenly paused. Was it possible that there still existed hearts too generous to smite a fallen foe? The conviction struck deeply on the goaded spirit of him against whom all mankind appeared to have made a common league; and Luca Pitti, the stern—the hard-hearted, and the treacherous, struggled for a moment against this one feeling of human softness, then leaned his head upon the balustrade—and wept. Recovering himself, he looked again. It was as he had at first perceived. There, in the same places which they had occupied during the short period of his grandeur, stood the priceless antique statues—the gift of the Medici. Of all the treasures which had been lavished upon him, these alone now remained

to Luca Pitti. Although of inestimable value, these alone had not been reclaimed ; and the hearts from which he would have drawn the life blood, were the only ones which had softened towards him in his disgrace. For a moment, the evil passions of the traitor were lulled, and he glanced rapidly back to former days, when the ties of friendship had bound him to those who were now the objects of his hatred.

He thought of the noble Cosmo—of Piero, and his gallant and accomplished sons ; he looked upon their gifts—gifts made in the full confidence of mutual faith and affection ; and he fancied that the sculptured brows gleamed sadly upon him, through the dim light which filled the hall. But then again, as he gazed around, and beheld, in the devastation of his palace, the ruin of his hopes, his evil passions once more took the ascendant. He raised himself from the drooping posture he had assumed—threw back his head as if to gain courage for some step that he meditated, when suddenly the midnight chime from the neighbouring convent struck his ear. His breath came short and quick ;—he grasped the balustrade with a

trembling hand, and, as the strokes fell one by one upon the solemn stillness of the night, it seemed as though the sound had frozen him to stone. The bell ceased, and Luca Pitti breathed again. That sound appeared to have wrought some sudden change within him. He looked stealthily round, as if in fear of discovery—advanced a few steps—then paused, and listened; a fiendish laugh from his lips told how keenly he felt that the Pitti palace now numbered no other being within its walls; and hurriedly advancing to a door before him, he threw it open. The shadow which fell upon the marble floor, showed that a human form stood in the entrance, but the face of the stranger was muffled in his cloak.

“Montesecco?” said Luca Pitti, inquiringly.

“I am here,” replied a low voice.

“Follow me,” said Luca Pitti, hurriedly; and taking the hand of the stranger, as though to draw him across the threshold, he secured the door by which they had entered, and, without speaking, led the way to a more remote chamber in the palace.

CHAPTER IV.

THE room to which Luca Pitti conducted his guest appeared to have been lately inhabited : some logs of wood were burning on the hearth ; and lighting a lamp, the owner of the apartment placed it on a table, upon which several cups and wine flagons still remained. Filling a large goblet, Luca Pitti hastily swallowed the contents, and by a gesture invited his companion to do the same ; but Monteseco, declining the offer, seated himself by the table, fixed his eyes upon the agitated countenance of his host, and appeared determined to await in silence the communication which the summons he had received entitled him to expect. The demon of irresolution seemed, however, to have suddenly seized upon one whose character had formerly been most decided. The nervous agitation of Luca Pitti increased every moment ; and as Monteseco continued to rivet his gaze upon him, exhibited

itself painfully, in the downcast look, which seemed to shun the eyes which he felt would read him to the soul.

The noble form and face of the young man, before whom one more than twice his age now quailed, were of that high and intellectual character which bespoke a nature equally difficult to deceive, as to persuade into any measure verging upon dishonour. The singular beauty of the features upon which Luca Pitti more than once cast a furtive glance ere he dared to speak, was the least attraction of Montesecco. Firmness and nobility of mind were in every line, while the softness of his fine dark eyes, and the gentle smile, which subdued the haughty curve of his short upper lip, gave a touching expression of melancholy to a countenance which seemed to belong to one who ought not to have suffered. That he had both felt and suffered, was apparent to any who could have followed the rapid changes of his face. For some minutes Luca Pitti had gazed upon it in silence, till at length he hurriedly spoke.

“Where did my messenger reach you?” were his first words.

“ At Rome,” replied Montesecco.

“ Ah ! it is then as I heard,” exclaimed Luca Pitti.

“ You have taken service with his Holiness the Pope ? ”

“ I have,” replied Montesecco ; “ for three years I have bound myself to serve, as may seem most fitting for the interest of the Holy See. But,” he exclaimed more eagerly, “ was it for this you summoned me in such haste ? ”

“ For what did you suppose I required your presence ? ” asked his companion calmly, as he fixed a searching look upon the anxious countenance of Montesecco.

“ I know not,” replied the latter ; “ yet I had hoped you were about to fulfil the promise - - . ”

“ Nay, my son,” interposed Luca Pitti, “ matters of more weight - - - ”

“ There are none of more weight,” interrupted the young man, “ none at least to me. You promised to reveal all. You promised, that if I would be patient until this year, you would tell me the secret of my birth—you would give me a name—a country—a home ! Think what it is to wander desolate on

the earth ; to feel that, among the countless multitudes that people it, there is not one being with whom you may claim kindred—one hand that you may grasp and say, ‘ this is of my blood ’—one hearth by which, in the hour of sorrow, you may stand, and feel that you have a right to its shelter and its love. Think of this, and pity, if not justice, will plead in my behalf.”

Luca Pitti looked upon the impassioned face of the speaker, and smiled. The earnestness of his manner convinced him that the anxiety of Montesecco was sincere, and through that anxiety how much might there not be gained ?

“ We will talk of this hereafter,” he said ; “ for the present, I have other views ; be patient.”

“ Patient !” cried Montesecco wildly. “ Ask the Saints for patience, but ask it not from me. I am but human ; a man, wronged, betrayed, and tempted by the beguiling art with which you have led me on for years to hope ; and now, once more, my hope is wrecked, and you ask me to be patient—ay—patient like the fawning spaniel, patient beneath a grief that stings to madness.”

“ Montesecco,” said Luca Pitti calmly, as the

young man buried his face in his hands, "you have been to me as a son—say, have I not fulfilled a father's part towards you? Yes," he continued, taking the hand which Montesecco extended towards him at these words, "your wish has been a law to me. It was by your own choice that the fortune I destined for you was spent in the equipment of troops; the life of a Condottiere was your own choice, and by it you have been enabled to distinguish yourself as few of your years have ever had an opportunity of doing. Whose name stands higher for deeds of fame than that of Giovanni Montesecco? And where is the sovereign, who would not gladly purchase, at any price, the service of your gallant band? Do you not perceive the position this renown may entitle you to occupy? The fate of cities—of provinces—nay, of kingdoms may be at your control; and," added the tempter, as he saw that the excitement of his hearer was gradually giving way to a profound attention, "why should not a kingdom be its price, and its reward?"

"How?" said Montesecco, "a kingdom?"

"It is but a word," replied Luca Pitti, care

lessly. "I said a kingdom; yet the name is nothing. Think you that he who now governs Florence has less power, because his brow is uncrowned? And yet no tyrant ever reigned with more despotic sway than does the citizen King under whom we writhe—while forced to smile, and to obey."

"I have been little in Florence," replied Montesecco; "but I thought the Medici were beloved as well as respected."

"There are others yet more beloved," said Luca Pitti, in a low voice; "what would be more easy than to place them where they should be? The people would rejoice—and *we* should triumph;" and Luca Pitti grasped the hand of the young soldier with transport.

"I understand you," said Montesecco, calmly; "the destruction of one family would secure the aggrandizement of another."

"Not the destruction. Let one old and useless branch be removed; the tree would still bud forth and flourish."

"Ay," replied Montesecco bitterly, "when nurtured by the refreshing dews of the dungeon

damp, or the burning sun of some distant clime. Piero dead—his young sons banished, or imprisoned, and Luca Pitti governs Florence. 'Tis well—and nobly planned.”

“ And why not ?” urged Luca Pitti, hastily, affecting not to notice the stinging contempt of the manner of Montesecco. “ It only needs one of those daring deeds which has made the name of Montesecco famous. Your troops —— ”

“ Are soldiers—not assassins,” exclaimed Montesecco fiercely, as the blood crimsoned his noble brow, “ and Montesecco is their chief.”

“ Nay—calm yourself, dear Giovanni,” said Luca Pitti, soothingly ; “ I merely meant that, should such a day occur, our position would be far other than it is now ; the bar which now exists between you and the discovery of the secret of your birth would be removed, and - - - ”

Montesecco started to his feet. “ Tempt me no further,” he cried ; “ and may the Holy Saints forgive me that I have hearkened to your words ! I know,” he continued, and his voice slightly faltered, “ how much I owe you. Command my

life—but remember, the honour of Montesecco is his all ;” and as the recollection of his desolate position rushed to his mind, the young soldier bent his head, to conceal the trembling tear beneath the long silken lashes that shaded his cheek.

The spirit and integrity which the bearing of Montesecco displayed had little effect upon the heart of his tempter ; but the deep emotion which he laboured to conceal from the eye of Luca Pitti convinced the latter that his victim was still in his power. Unwilling, by further irritation, to lose an advantage he felt he possessed, he hastened to change the conversation, by inquiring what news the Condottiere had brought from Rome.

“ There was not much when I left it. The jubilee still continues ; and the popularity of the new Pope increases.”

“ You know,” said Luca Pitti, inquiringly, “ that Lorenzo de’ Medici has been chosen to bear the greetings of the Florentines to His Holiness upon his accession ?”

“ I had heard it whispered,” replied Montesecco ; “ but such is the terror which the memory of

Paul II. has left in the minds of the Roman people, that few dare to canvass openly any measure relating to his Holiness. The prisons of Rome yet groan with the crowds of men of science and learning, with whom, under pretence of being dangerous to the state, Paul had filled them."

"And my old friend, Roderigo Borgia, how does he bear himself towards the new Pontiff? The Papal crown would have better graced the proud brow of the Borgia," said Luca Pitti.

"His Eminence is of the same opinion," replied Montesecco, smiling; "he but bides his time—meanwhile his state overshadows all; he alone, of the Cardinals, has availed himself of the permission of Paul II. to wear in public the tiara and purple robe; and when he rides forth, I would you could behold the blaze of jewels he displays, while the scarlet housings of his horse sweep the ground; and he waves his hand to the people more with the air of a conquerer in triumph, than an humble follower of the church."

"Ha! well do I recognise the pride of the Borgia in this. None ever failed who played so bold a game.

He will be Pope one day—and then—but,” said Luca Pitti, interrupting himself, as though afraid to trust his hearer too far, “what of the crusade?”

“It is yet undecided,” said Montesecco, sadly; “would that it were once determined. Italy will see the fierce Mahomet sweep her fairest provinces from her bosom, ere she will hush her petty griefs, and unite against the common enemy; every month brings news of fresh inroads upon her power—would that I had the means - - -”

“Which you have not,” broke in Luca Pitti, sharply. “Leave Rome to settle her disputes with the Sultan. It is now many years since she calmly saw Constantinople destroyed, and with its fall ended all her sympathy with her Eastern brethren. Since then what have been the crusades? a mere mummary. No, my dear Montesecco, think not of the crusade—we have matters of importance nearer home. And now, when do you propose returning to Rome?”

“This very hour,” replied the young man; “I little thought, when I hurried hither on your summons, it was only to hear a proposal of ——”

“Of what?” said Luca Pitti, anxiously, as Montesecco hesitated to conclude the sentence he had begun.

“*Of murder,*” was the reply, uttered in a solemn tone.

“No, no—not of murder! surely, you mistook my meaning—it was but on public grounds that I suggested - - -; but we will speak no more of it. To-night, you say, you leave Florence.”

“My horses wait without the gates—we part this very hour,” said Montesecco, with a bitterness which did not escape his companion.

“We part, though not for long. I, too, must journey towards Rome. But first, let me give you what you must deliver with your own hands—these letters to the Pope; this to the Cardinal Borgia; and now farewell. The dawn is breaking, it were well you were not seen in Florence.”

“And this is all?” said Montesecco, as he marked the haste with which his companion would have dismissed him, while a lingering hope still remained in his own bosom that some allusion to his history might have marked their conference.

“All!” replied Luca Pitti, sternly.

“ Then farewell,” said the young soldier, sadly, as he folded his cloak round him.

“ For the present,” answered Luca Pitti. “ We shall meet at Rome.”

CHAPTER V.

BITTER were the feelings of Montesecco as he pursued his solitary journey towards Rome. He had quitted it full of hope, and he returned with a feeling of degradation; for it was degradation, to a mind like his, to have listened, even unwillingly, to a proposal of a dishonourable nature. Disappointed in the hope which had filled his breast on receiving the summons of one whom he had hitherto obeyed as a parent, the ideas of Montesecco became clouded and melancholy, from the sudden revulsion of feeling. He exaggerated to himself the discomforts of his position, and called to mind a variety of imaginary slights he had received. He even considered whether it would not be advisable, since Luca Pitti persevered in the obstinate silence he had so long preserved with regard to the birth and parentage of one

whom he had cherished from infancy, to relieve him entirely from a charge which he must now consider irksome, and by obtaining a dismissal from the Pope, remain free to follow a profession of arms in some distant land, and there to seek a country and a home.

By degrees, however, these feelings of sorrow and disappointment gave way to a lighter mood. A new life opened before him. What might not the next three years produce in his favour? For that period he had placed himself and his adherents at the disposal of the Pope. This was a mode of obtaining military employment sanctioned by the custom of the day. The constant warfare in which Italy and the South of Europe was engaged, was usually carried on through the means of the Condottieri, sometimes men of rank and station, though occasionally adventurers ambitious of renown, who hired themselves and their troops to the various petty states. It was considered highly dishonourable, while the period of such an engagement remained unexpired, either to slacken in zeal for the service of the state upon which the Condottiere and his troops depended, or to attempt to abridge

the period of that service without sufficient justification.

In making an engagement with the Pope, Montesecco had been chiefly influenced by the expectation of a crusade against the Turks, in which he might have added fresh laurels to those he had already won ; but in this hope he was destined to be disappointed. The subject of a crusade was one which at Rome was constantly revived, and as constantly abandoned ; and since the signal failure of the gallant attempt of Pius II., who, having organized every thing for a sacred war, quitted Rome with all the pomp of military and religious zeal, no further attempt at curbing the insolence of Mahomet had been made.

From the period of the fall of Constantinople, the Sultan had gradually advanced towards Italy, and now threatened several of the nearest provinces with the fate which had befallen the unhappy Greeks. Nothing showed the tameness of spirit of the Italian princes more than the apathy with which they regarded the progress of the Turks ; but Italy, divided by petty tyrants, was no longer a nation. Her princes had lost their pride,—her

magistrates their power,—her warriors their courage, and her citizens their patriotism ; and yielding to the growing spirit of luxury, and the gratification of revenge for the petty insults of their nearest neighbours, the Italian states wasted the strength which, if combined, might still have placed them at the head of nations, and calmly looked on while the galleys of the Sultan swept their shores.

In a few years, Italy had lost most of her colonies in the isles of Greece. She allowed the conquest of the shores of Dalmatia, Epirus, and Peleponnesus, which, in the hands of the Christians, secured the empire of the Adriatic ; but, in those of the Turks, exposed Italy to the invasions of a people hating her laws, religion, and manners.

It was this position of affairs which, a few years before the appearance of Montesecco as a candidate for military renown, had urged the high-spirited Pius II. to undertake a crusade. He quitted Rome with a train of unequalled splendour, followed by ten cardinals, sixty bishops, and a crowd of princes and ambassadors. For a time the enthusiasm of the country was roused. All the states through which he passed vied with each

other in doing him honour. Perugia received him as a king ! Sienna recalled all her banished nobility at his request ; and at Florence his litter was borne by the principal nobles, who gave fêtes of a most magnificent description during his stay in their city. But all was of no avail. Ere the Pope could reach Ancona, his plans were frustrated by the internal dissensions which had arisen in his army ; a great portion of his troops deserted by the way ; and Pius, perceiving that all prospect of success against the Infidels was lost, and trembling for the sovereignty of Rome, resolved to employ the remainder of his force in quelling the disturbances at home, and in assisting Ferdinand of Naples in his endeavours to keep the French and the house of Anjou at a distance.

Thus ended the only real attempt at a crusade ; and though the reigning Pope still held out a hope, and had even commanded a jubilee to be celebrated, in order to secure funds for the enterprise, yet the eagerness with which Montesecco had bound himself to the service of the Pontiff, only tended to make the disappointment more keen, when he perceived that no real intention of the kind existed

on the part of his new master. The sanguine spirit of the young Condottiere constantly exposed him to similar mortifications. Ever ready to imagine that whatever he most desired, was about to be realized, the constant revulsion of feeling which he was doomed to experience had begun to act upon his character, producing a morbid sensation of distrust, foreign to the fearless and chivalrous frankness of his nature. The recent conduct of Luca Pitti had not tended to diminish this impression, and it needed all the support of the vigorous intellect with which Montesecco had been endowed, to overcome the dejection which the disappointment of his dearest hopes had occasioned.

During the first days of his journey he had suffered keenly ; but as he drew near to Rome, and remembered the gallant troop whose perils and glory he had so often shared, he felt that he was not desolate upon the earth, and his spirits rose on his approach to the city, in which, as the dependants of the Pope, his soldiers were now quartered.

The scene also became more enlivening. The jubilee had attracted from various parts of Italy, pilgrims of every age and calling, hastening to con-

tribute their mite to the exigencies of the Holy See, and the defence of their country and religion ; for such were the grounds upon which this tax was levied ; while the promise of an indulgence to all who should personally deposit their offerings at Rome, in the coffers of the Medici, who were then the bankers of the Pope, induced many thousands to make the journey, rather than forego the advantage held out to them.

As Montesecco approached the termination of his journey, he was not surprised to find the roads crowded with travellers. Most of them were of the middle and lower class ; but amongst the more prominent of the wayfarers with whom he had interchanged courtesies, was one who had irresistibly attracted his attention. This was a man between sixty and seventy years of age, at least if years could be calculated by the extreme whiteness of his hair, and a beard which fell nearly to his waist. His figure was tall and erect ; but, as the folds of the large cloak in which he was enveloped sometimes waved aside, Montesecco was much amused by perceiving that the stirrups of the stranger were so shortened as to bring his feet almost

into the position which should have been occupied by his knees.

Montesecco, who was accounted the best horseman of his day, could scarcely reconcile this eastern mode of riding with the simple habit of the Italian citizen, which the rest of the stranger's dress denoted ; but the superiority of the steed upon which he was mounted, as well as the whole of his equipment, and that of his companion, convinced the young Condottiere that he who rode by his side was as thoroughly versed in the requisite qualities of a horse, as expert in the management of the animal.

Having fully satisfied himself upon this point, Montesecco turned his attention to the only follower of the mysterious traveller, who for two days had ridden in his company without interchanging more than a slight inclination of the head with any of those whose journey compelled them to keep the same road. Nothing could afford a greater contrast than did the stranger to his only companion, who was a young and lively Greek boy, dressed out in all the picturesque finery of his nation, and in the wildest ecstasy of delight at every occurrence which marked the progress of the party.

Mounted upon a small and fiery horse, the boy never ceased urging the animal to prance about in every direction. Sometimes he would gallop on a-head, returning at the same pace, merely to have the mischievous pleasure of scattering to the right and left several devout pilgrims, who appeared somewhat unused to riding ; at others, he would dive into the thickets which skirted the road, and suddenly re-appear in a direction where he was least expected, laughing with childish glee at the surprise his abrupt movements excited, and ever and anon riding close to the old man, and casting a wistful look towards his grave countenance.

Montesecco remarked that the features of the traveller occasionally relaxed almost to a smile, and assumed an expression of melancholy tenderness, as he gazed upon the glowing face of the young Greek, and witnessed his gambols among the sedate pilgrims with whom chance had brought him in contact ; but, to the surprise of the Condottiere, he never heard either address the other. There was evidently kindness, attention, and even love on both sides, but words were wanting. In silence they had joined the party, and in silence they con-

tinued to ride forward. When this observation first occurred to Montesecco, he deemed that it must be the offspring of his own fancy ; yet as the day advanced the impression became confirmed, till, at length, so forcible was the attraction which it created, that to separate from the mysterious travellers became impossible.

The old man evidently observed that the attention of Montesecco was rivetted upon him, but no sign, either of pleasure or dissatisfaction, escaped him. He continued to ride on without speaking. The curiosity of Montesecco rose to a height that was actually painful. In vain did he endeavour to include the stranger in the conversation with which he and the other travellers beguiled the way ; a look or a bow was all he could extort. Once, when the roughness of the road had nearly caused the animal on which the young Greek was mounted, to throw its rider, Montesecco, perceiving the terror of the old man, darted to his side, in the hope that the hurry of the moment might betray the travellers into breaking the silence they had so long preserved, but he was disappointed. A look of reproof or caution, was all that the danger of

the boy extorted from his companion ; and thus it continued ; and whether on the lonely road, or the crowded inn, at which the travellers were obliged to share in common the few comforts it afforded, these two, differing so widely in all other respects, passed on in unbroken silence, until Montesecco persuaded himself that they were, doubtless, bound by a holy vow, or condemned to penance for some fearful sin.

The strong sense of the Condottiere could not altogether preserve him free from the gross superstition which, in that age, too often took the place of religion ; and such was the excitement which the constant scrutiny of the actions of the travellers had caused in his mind, that he at last ceased to regard them as Pilgrims, and believing them under the ban of the Holy Church, resolved to hold no further communication with them.

In this resolution, however, he was doomed to disappointment. His horse had on the previous day met with a slight accident ; but from continued travelling, the lameness, which had at first been trifling, increased so materially, that he determined, instead of endeavouring to reach the city that night,

to rest until morning at the cottage of the first peasant he should happen to meet. About to separate from his strange companions, Montesecco tried to shake off the sensation of curiosity which had so forcibly taken possession of his mind; but in proportion as he attempted to avoid the strangers, so did it appear that they had become interested in him. The bright eyes of the boy were constantly fixed upon his own, and the grave look of the old man seemed also more frequently turned towards the young Condottiere. Still the same silence as before; and Montesecco, whose feeling of irritation at this unusual conduct increased every moment, actually shuddered as the eyes of the strangers met his own, and more than once he crossed himself as the dread of the *Malocchio* rushed to his mind. He, therefore, resolved to rid himself of their company as soon as possible, and urging on his tired and injured steed in a manner no way calculated to restore its soundness of limb, he soon left the party in the rear; and having entered a wood, to his great delight he discovered a small house, at which he determined to ask shelter for the night.

The house only seemed to contain one wretched

individual, an old man, whose appearance denoted extreme poverty, and who gladly accepted the offer with which Montesecco accompanied the demand for a night's lodging. A small shed at the back of the house was shown him as a stable ; and having, early in the morning, sent forward to the city the men who had served him as an escort, Montesecco now fulfilled towards his favourite horse all those cares and duties which every soldier knows how to perform. This done, he returned to the house, when, to his vexation, he found that he was not to be the only guest. There, in the spot where he had left him, sat the old man to whom the cottage belonged, and by his side, and with the same imperturbable expression of gravity depicted on his countenance, Montesecco beheld his fellow-traveller, the stranger with the white beard ; while the Greek boy stood at a little distance patting the horses, and peering round with his bright black eyes, as if in hopes of discovering some new mode of amusement.

Montesecco, uttering a hasty imprecation, resolved immediately to proceed towards Rome. His curiosity respecting the strangers, was rapidly

changing to aversion ; and irritated at the idea of passing the night by compulsion in their company, he returned to the stable. Here his better feelings prevailed. His gallant but way-worn steed was unfit for farther travel, and as he marked the weary limbs of the noble animal, Montesecco experienced a sensation of self contempt as he dwelt upon the puerile suspicions which he had allowed to creep into his breast. With an effort at overcoming the absurd prejudice he had conceived against his fellow-travellers, he bent his steps towards the house, but finding that it boasted only of one room, in which they had already installed themselves, he declined disturbing them ; and intending to pursue his journey with the first dawn, he once more turned to the stable, and without taking off the light armour which he wore, threw himself upon the straw with which one end of the hut was filled, and was soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER VI.

How long the slumbers of Montesecco lasted was unknown, even to himself. Tired with his long journey, he slept soundly at first, until disturbed by a disagreeable sensation, which, without awakening him, destroyed the comfort of his repose. Oppressed as if by a painful dream, he lay uneasily on his couch of straw, but again and again the same sensation returned, and he moved restlessly from side to side, as though striving with some unseen power. Still he did not awake, until at length, yielding as it were to a sudden and irresistible impulse, he started from his sleep, and raising himself upon his couch, gazed around him. And there, in the dim moonlight, ere his senses had found their tone, his excited imagination painted innumerable phantoms; but all bore the same form—the form of his mysterious fellow-travellers. In every glimmer of the moon's pale light through the

crevices of the shed, he fancied that he saw the old man with his long white beard, first horribly distinct, then fading away to a shadow, and now re-appearing in a form of such magnitude that it seemed to fill up the whole room.

Montesecco turned away, but only to meet the shining eyes of the Greek boy, which appeared to flash upon him with superhuman brightness from every corner. And the brave Condottiere, who would with unshrinking courage have met death upon the field, shuddered as the phantoms of his own imagination flitted before him. But it is not a phantom, or if so, it is one of flesh and blood, that now creeps to the side of the soldier. A movement almost habitual caused Montesecco to grasp his sword as he distinctly felt the pressure of a hand upon his breast. With a sudden start he rose to his feet, and there, in the fitful light, gleamed upwards to his own the same bright eyes which had haunted him while he slept.

It was not then a dream—the Greek boy was kneeling at his feet, and Montesecco, as he bent towards him, perceived that he was in tears. Yielding to the mute entreaty which seemed to urge him to

follow, he allowed the boy to lead him from the hut; but not seeing any object outside that justified his suspicions of danger, he hesitated to advance. Still his companion seemed unsatisfied, and with tears and sobs made signs to him to follow.

“What would you have of me?” said Montesecco.
“Speak, and I will obey.”

The answer of the Greek was the sudden pressure of his fingers on the lips of the Condottiere; then throwing himself on his knees before him, with uplifted hands he seemed to implore his help, and rising instantly, he retreated towards the house, beckoning Montesecco to follow, while, with his finger on his lips, he evidently wished to impose on his supporter the silence he himself practised. From the earnestness of the boy's manner, Montesecco judged that something had happened; and, no longer hesitating, followed the cautious steps of the young Greek.

He soon gained the entrance to the house. The outside door was open, but that leading to the room where the travellers had been lodged, was closed and fastened, and as Montesecco passed he heard the sound of angry voices within. Leading him

up a few steps, the boy suddenly seized the hand of the Condottiere, and pressing it fervently to his lips, pointed downwards, at the same time crouching on his hands and knees. Montesecco understood the appeal, and following his example, he found that a sliding panel in the wall, which had been only partially closed, gave to view the whole of the iniquitous scene enacting in the room below.

Stretched upon the floor was the venerable form of the traveller who had excited so much of the attention of the Condottiere. Tightly bound and gagged, he lay at the mercy of two ferocious looking ruffians, who, with the old man to whom the house belonged, were the other occupants of the chamber. The truth instantly flashed upon the mind of Montesecco. The old man was in league with the robbers, and the house was one of those with which the Campagna abounded, and into which unwary travellers were decoyed to be plundered or to die, as might best suit the purposes of the fierce brigands who infested the neighbourhood of Rome.

A gloomy silence had taken the place of the late angry discussion, and Montesecco bent his ear to

the opening of the panel, in order to catch the first sentence that might be uttered. It was the old man who first spoke.

“ I tell thee, Carlo,” he said to the eldest of the ruffians, “ it is of no use to take his life. I know who he is—I saw him pass this way before ; and I know he is rich ;—he will pay for his ransom.”

“ Ay, and send the Condottiere with his troops to scour the Campagna, and drive us all, like sheep, to the mountains,” replied the robber, with a hoarse laugh.

“ No, that will never do, friend Domenico,” observed the second of the brigands ; “ we must either put him out of the way at once, or thou must send him to keep company with some of thy guests below ;” and he pointed to the floor of the room.

“ What ! in the dungeon, and alive ?” replied the old man with a shudder. “ Now the saints preserve me, but I should never sleep without thinking I heard him rattling the bones of all those that are there already. No, I never could bear the terror of it—and with so little of the spoil too for my share,” he added in a whining tone.

“ By Saint Peter !” exclaimed the fierce Carlo, “ if thou darest to grumble, this hand shall send thee below to keep company with the skeletons thou so lovest ;” and he shook his clenched hand at the trembling wretch before him.

“ Nay, good Carlo—thou art merry,” said the old man, with his teeth chattering, and his knees shaking.

“ But what of the gold ? how much ? - - - ”

“ What is that to thee, thou old scarecrow,” interrupted Carlo with a growl. “ Thou hast more than thou needest I think for thy vile body, and all the gold in the Pope’s coffers would not save a soul like thine one hour of purgatory.

“ Here, Anselmo,” he continued, addressing his companion, “ put that in thy doublet ;” and he threw him a small bag which he had taken from the vest of the stranger. “ And now be quick—decide—what is to be done with this lump of clay ?” and he spurned with his foot the prostrate body of the captive. “ Decide, for I must be gone. The Pilgrims swarm to the city—there may be some worth lightening of their alms.”

“ Dispatch him at once,” replied Anselmo ; “ the

day is breaking—we should have been miles hence ere now.”

“No, no,” cried the old man, “slay him not ; or if thou dost,” he added, looking round fearfully, “thou must slay the boy too. He sleeps now ; but he may wake, and bring ruin upon us.”

“He shall not wake,” said Carlo calmly, “where is he ?”

“Above, in the little chamber,” answered the old man ; “but touch him not ; his ransom will make us rich for ever,” and the old man rubbed his hands as he spoke.

“Cease thy chattering,” cried Anselmo, “what dost thou know of ransom ? one stroke of this will be the best,” and he laid his hands on his poniard as he spoke.

“I do know,” cried the old man ; “the prisoner is rich as he is great. It is Hassan the merchant,” he continued, in a lower tone ; “and the Pope himself would ransom him, sooner than harm should befall him.”

“What,” cried Carlo, “Hassan, the rich merchant of Smyrna ? Now out upon thee, thou old dotard, to think that name is aught but his death

warrant. Were he to escape, and tell his tale, not a brigand within a hundred miles of Rome would be alive at this hour to-morrow ;” and rising he advanced with fury towards the prisoner.

Another moment, and all was lost ; but ere he could draw his dagger, Montesecco sprung from his hiding place.

“ Ha ! betrayed ! villain, take that !” shouted Carlo ; and, as he spoke, he plunged his dagger in the heart of the old man, who fell dead at his feet.

The next instant, the sword of Montesecco was at the breast of the robber. Fierce and terrible was the struggle that ensued. Throwing away his sword, the brave Condottiere pressed upon the brigand so closely that ere he could draw the knife from his belt, a deep wound in the side had been inflicted by the short poniard which Montesecco carried, while the armour of the latter protected him from the furious blows which Carlo aimed at his breast. Wounded, but not disabled, the brigand continued the fight, attempting to retreat towards the door, a chance of escape which the superior science of the Condottiere as constantly

prevented. Step by step, and inch by inch, the combatants disputed the ground, when an accident had nearly deprived Montesecco of his life.

The young Greek, despite the prohibition of the Condottiere, had followed him when he made his sudden entry among the robbers; and unable to cope with them by strength, had employed a stratagem, the success of which proved the sagacity of the device. Springing from his concealment, while the second brigand, with his back turned to the secret panel, was listening to the suggestions of Carlo, the boy had with the speed of light contrived to seize from behind, both the arms of the robber; and entwining them with his own, pinioned him as securely as though he had been bound with cords. In vain did the brigand try to shake him off, the young Greek clung to him with the tenacity of a wild cat seizing on its prey. The quick eye of Montesecco marked the struggle, and his heart trembled for the result. The robber had the advantage in point of strength, but the agility of the boy was surprising, as, scrambling and clinging, he endeavoured, and successfully, to prevent the second brigand from coming to the rescue of his

companion. Charmed with the heroic bravery of the young Greek, which, notwithstanding his own peril, Montesecco plainly perceived, he continued to cheer and encourage him by his voice. His own antagonist now began to waver, when a heavy fall close to his side announced that the strength of one of the other combatants had yielded. For an instant Montesecco turned his head, but in that instant, while a well-directed blow from his hand disabled the arm of the brigand ready to plunge a dagger to the heart of the poor boy who lay struggling beneath him, the brave Condottiere felt the point of a weapon upon his own shoulder. Madened by the pain, he returned with double fury to the charge, and in a few moments the fierce Carlo lay dead beside his companion, who, unable to defend himself after the wound inflicted by Montesecco, had been stabbed by the boy, whose life had so nearly paid the forfeit of his rash but noble courage.

CHAPTER VII.

RELIEVED from his bonds, the first movement of Hassan was to throw himself into the arms of his brave defender ; and Montesecco forgot all his former doubts and suspicions as he listened to the thanks of the captive whom he had rescued. But if his mind was relieved as to the mystery which had hitherto attended his fellow-traveller, his heart was deeply moved as he looked upon the frantic joy of the young Greek, at the safety of his companion. Again and again, he wound his arms round the venerable form of Hassan, stroked his long beard, looked at his hands, and kissed and wept over them with passionate fondness, as he pressed them to his heart. Still he did not speak ; and it was only on Montesecco addressing some words of praise to him, that the secret was revealed. The boy was dumb.

“How long,” asked Montesecco, who was inex-

pressibly touched by the discovery, "has this been the case?"

"From his birth," replied Hassan. "Happily, his parents died ere they could have known the sorrow that awaited them. Poor Gennaro," he continued, as he fondly stroked the long black curls of the young Greek.

"He is not then your son?" inquired Montesecco.

"I have no child," replied Hassan with a heavy sigh, as he thought of the cruel destiny of the only daughter of his love. "But fate has so ordained that two orphans, both Greeks, call me father."

"And yet," observed Montesecco with some hesitation, "I should not say that Greece had been the country of your birth."

"No," replied Hassan sadly, "nor yet Italy, though Italy is now my home. Years have elapsed since I was driven from my own land, and then I bore in my arms the infant of one who had saved my life. I fled to Naples, where many Greeks had found shelter. Demetrius of Ypsara came there with his bride, the beautiful Chezmé; it was there Gennaro was born. For a while we

were happy and at peace; but a pestilence arose, and once again I fled from the home where my best friends lay dead, bringing with me Melanthe the daughter of my adoption, and poor Gennaro, the only child of those two bright and beauteous ones, whom I had seen laid side by side in their grave. God is merciful! I was spared to watch over the fatherless. I came to Rome—I have toiled for them. Heaven befriended me; I am rich. I owe my life to their parents, and Hassan is not ungrateful.”

The old man paused in deep emotion. It seemed that unrestrained communication was foreign to his nature, so great was the effort he appeared to make in thus revealing his history to Montesecco; but the heart of Hassan was full of affection, though the habits of his nation, which long years of separation from it could not break through, had inured him to reserve and silence.

“Heaven will reward you,” said Montesecco; then calling to mind the absurd suspicions with which his head had been filled during the journey, he gaily recounted them to Hassan. “Why did

you not speak to me?" he asked, "when you must have seen my anxiety that you should do so?"

"My son," replied Hassan gravely, "it is my rule never to speak unless it is necessary; and if I have prospered in the world, it is chiefly by the observance of this rule. You asked me no direct question, therefore why should I have trusted a stranger? but the heart that has risked its blood, and the hand that has struck in our defence, are no longer those of the stranger, therefore Hassan has told thee all, and now bids thee follow him to his home; henceforth shall Montesecco be unto him as a son. Let me bind up thy wound, then will we depart."

To this proposal Montesecco gladly acceded. With skill and tenderness the old man bandaged the shoulder of the Condottiere so as to enable him to proceed upon his journey; and Gennaro leading his horse from the stable, they turned from the scene of bloodshed, and once more took the road to Rome.

CHAPTER VIII.

THERE was a garden on the banks of the Tiber. Bright and lovely was that garden, as on the desolate bank of the rapid river it stood alone in its beauty ; for the shore on either side was unmarked, save by some few straggling trees and bushes that hung over the low huts of the poor fishermen. It was the garden of Hassan the Turk ; or, as he was called at Rome, Hassan the merchant ; having, the better to disguise all traces of his former state, announced on his arrival that commerce was his profession, and Smyrna his birth-place. The truth of these assertions had never been questioned ; and Hassan steadily pursuing his course, had risen gradually until he arrived at a state of affluence ; while his cautious conduct in keeping aloof from the fierce feuds which the state of party in Rome constantly engendered, caused him to be looked upon with equal respect by all factions, and he

was not unfrequently chosen as umpire in their quarrels.

Unlike the palaces of the nobles, which were little better than fortifications, the house of Hassan was open on all sides. Situated in the midst of a beautiful garden, it bore more the appearance of an Eastern pavilion, than the dwelling of a Roman merchant; but it was upon the apartments of his adopted daughter, Melanthe, and the garden destined for her recreation, that Hassan had expended his chief care; and often had he longed for the hour, when, released from the routine of convent education, she should quit the good sisters to whom he had entrusted her on his arrival at Rome, and come to share with Gennaro the pleasures of his house and home.

That happy day had arrived; and though Hassan still delayed his arrival beyond the expected hour, his child anxiously awaited him. Tired with watching, Melanthe had walked out towards the river. She was not alone; Clarice, the beautiful daughter of Jacopo Orsini, stood by her side. They had been friends from childhood. Educated together in the same convent—then the

only mode of education for the daughters of the rich and noble—they had shared the same tasks, enjoyed the same amusements, and happy in each other's love, had never known a want or a care. Now, on the first day of their liberty, their only sorrow had been endured. They felt that they were about to be separated. But though endeared by affection, until they seemed to have their very being in common, the two girls did not differ more in appearance than they did in character and disposition. The soft glances of Clarice had, in their gentle languor, an expression of touching helplessness; while the dark and thoughtful eyes of Melanthe seemed to scan the thoughts of all who met their mild but searching look. Above the middle size, the exquisite proportions of her figure gave grace and dignity to every movement, while the very twining of the pliant form of Clarice, as shaking back her glossy chesnut curls, she looked up in the face of Melanthe, spoke of timidity and dependance, and the beautiful Greek gazed tenderly down upon the half childish form and face of a companion somewhat younger than

herself, and strove to comfort her under their approaching separation.

“ Ah !” said Clarice, with a sigh, “ it is very well for you—here in this lovely garden with your painting or your embroidery, or those musty parchments over which you delight to pore, you may be very happy.”

“ And why should you not be so ?” asked Melanthe ; “ you who have a father to love and cherish ?”

“ Oh yes !” replied Clarice, “ of course I do love him ; but you know he never speaks to me ; or if he does, it is of things I cannot understand.”

“ Then why not try to understand them, dear Clarice ?” said her friend ?—“ why not try to have ideas in unison with those around you ?—It would make you happier, and be better for all parties.”

“ Oh ! you can do every thing, but I never should succeed,” said Clarice, pettishly. “ My father never speaks of any thing but the state of parties in Rome, or the grandeur of our house, till I am sick to death of the glories of the Orsini.”

“ You would not despise a lineage and a name,

could you feel the misery of being without one," said Melanthe, sadly.

"Dear Melanthe," cried Clarice, embracing her, "I did not mean to make you unhappy—why do you always grieve over that one subject?—you know Hassan has declared that he is certain of your father's safety, for that it has been ascertained that he quitted Constantinople unhurt, and came to Italy: one day, his abode will be discovered. Till then be patient."

"I will try to be so," said Melanthe, with a melancholy smile, "and you will promise me the same."

"Oh, as to me, the Madonna grant me patience. Shut up all day in that gloomy palace of my father's, how I envy you this lovely garden, and the gay spirits of Gennaro all day long to keep you company."

"But you will have guests, Clarice. You forget the Prince—your father has summoned you a week sooner than you expected, to do the honours of his house to the young Lorenzo de' Medici, who comes to congratulate his Holiness."

"How I wish he had staid at Florence,"

exclaimed Clarice. "If it was only for the way I have been tormented about him, I am resolved to hate him."

"A wise resolution," said Melanthe smiling; "take care that the contrary effect does not ensue from so much determination."

"Nonsense," said Clarice blushing; "but really I do grieve at having been obliged to leave our convent in such a hurry. I could not even finish the piece of tapestry I had promised the good Sisters for a covering for the Madonna's footstool."

"You can finish it at your leisure," said Melanthe. "If that is your only omission, you will have little to confess."

"Nay, I have more than that," said Clarice, shaking her pretty head mysteriously; "but tell me, Melanthe, do you think, now we have left the convent, we shall still have no one to confess to, except Padre Anselmo? I cannot tell why, but I never could kneel by that man's side without a shudder. I always felt as if the *Malocchio* was upon me, when I met his bright black eyes peeping out from beneath his cowl!" and Clarice, who was very superstitious, crossed herself devoutly, which

prevented her remarking the confusion which the name of the priest had spread over the countenance of Melanthe. The crimson blush which had for an instant burned upon her cheek turned to a deadly paleness ; and averting her head, she would have sought for some pretext for absenting herself from the side of her companion, when fortunately the sound of horses' feet was heard rapidly approaching.

“ It is Hassan,” exclaimed Melanthe.

“ Yes, and Gennaro,” cried Clarice. “ Farewell, dear Melanthe, I will leave you to your happiness ; but do not fail to be with me to-morrow, in time to receive our guests.”

“ I will not fail,” answered Melanthe ; and Clarice, quitting the garden by a side gate, proceeded to the Orsini Palace, while Melanthe turned to the house to welcome her adopted father and her play-fellow Gennaro. With trembling horror she listened to the account which Hassan detailed, of the danger from which they had been rescued by the bravery of Montesecco ; and the blush of delight with which the young Condottiere received the fervent thanks of the beautiful being who stood before him, showed

that he was already reconciled to the prospect of the life of inactivity which at first he had dreaded, and which he knew must be his portion ere the effects of the dangerous wound he had received could pass away.

CHAPTER IX.

AND now it seemed as though all Rome kept holiday. The Pope had declared his intention of receiving, in full state, the congratulations which the republic of Florence conveyed through its young chief, Lorenzo de' Medici, and it soon became known in the city, that it was the desire of his Holiness that every honour and respect should be paid to him, and the Florentine nobles who accompanied him.

Early in the morning, when the first interview between the Pope and Lorenzo was to take place, every street and window was crowded with spectators, anxious to behold the young man whose fame had already preceded him. Perhaps also, the good citizens of Rome were not sorry to have the variety of a peaceable procession, instead of the constant clang of armed men paraded through their streets, and domesticated as it were in the palaces of their nobles, a measure rendered necessary by the turbulent state of the times, where might was right,

and every excess permitted or pardoned to those who could pay for their crimes or enforce their demands.

The friendly disposition of the newly elected Pontiff towards the republic of Florence was hailed as an omen of approaching tranquillity. To follow the example of the Pope and Cardinals, was always deemed a measure of policy by the Roman citizens; and even in those who did not approve, subserviency was too convenient to be cast aside for opinion. Bright and gladly rose the sun upon the city of Rome, and before long every spot leading from the palace of the Pope was crowded. Banners floated from the walls and roofs of the houses; the balconies were hung with tapestry and rich velvets, bands of music were stationed at intervals, and every eye was strained to catch the first glimpse of the citizen Prince, as he issued from the Orsini palace, where he had been welcomed as the son of an old and valued friend, by the proudest of Rome's ancient nobles, Jacopo Orsini.

But the ponderous gates still rested on their hinges; and, tired with waiting, the multitude began to murmur at the delay, when a movement was

observed in the opposite direction, and soon the rich liveries of the attendants of a Cardinal announced the approach of one of that body ; and Roderigo Borgia, the most powerful, the most splendid, and the most daring amongst those whose dominion was absolute and whose licence unbridled, rode into the street which led to the palace of the Orsini. As a special mark of favour, he had been deputed to conduct Lorenzo to the presence of the Pope. As soon as the people became aware of his purpose, the air was rent with their cries, “ Viva sua Eminenza il Cardinale Borgia ! ” “ Long live the Cardinals ! ” “ long live the Pope ! ” was shouted by thousands of voices ; and the pride of the haughty Cardinal increased tenfold, as he viewed the symptoms of popularity which his presence excited.

Well did Roderigo Borgia understand the passions of those whom he sought to govern. The love of show was not the least of the weaknesses which he knew to be inherent in the Roman people, and to gratify it to the utmost was always his care. A few years previously, the dress and equipment of the fathers of the church had been more consonant to the spirit in which they professed to

govern their flock ; but Paul II., who was a very handsome man, had, in order to render the dress more becoming, and thus to ensure the good will of such of the Cardinals as had equal pretensions, departed widely from the primitive rule of modesty in appearance. He granted to the body of Cardinals permission to wear the purple robe and jewelled tiara, hitherto sacred to his own use ; also the scarlet habit, and housings of the same colour for their horses. Upon this occasion, the proud Borgia displayed to the eyes of the multitude the whole glory of his insignia. Jewels flashed from his tiara, and sparkled not only upon his bridle rein, but the deep fringes of gold which bordered the housings of his steed were studded with gems, and the stirrups of gold, and crimson velvet saddle, also shone with jewels.

The Cardinal, as he reined in the prancing steed, which tossed its plumed head impatiently at the restraint, rode more with the air of a knight trained in the lists, or on the field, than that of a modest churchman ; and preceded by his guards, his pages, and forty running footmen, in suits of scarlet silk and gold, made his way through the assembled

multitude, returning with courteous benedictions the admiration they bestowed, until, having reached the Orsini palace, he disappeared with his glittering train beneath the portals. Without dismounting, the Cardinal returned the greetings of the circle assembled within the court of the palace; and not sorry to be obliged to appear in a character which he so well suited, he backed his horse until he stood opposite the balcony where Clarice and her beautiful friend Melanthe were seated; and bowing gracefully, in return for their salutation, resumed his place in the procession; yielding to Lorenzo the place of honour, he took his way, riding at the left side of his young companion, to the palace of the Pope.

There could not be a greater contrast than was afforded by the appearance of Lorenzo de' Medici, and the proud Borgia. The splendid dark beauty of the Cardinal, enhanced by the brilliant colours of his dress and equipment, might have cast into the shade one of less pretensions than Lorenzo; but the noble air of the young Florentine could not be eclipsed. Tall, and beautifully formed, he looked to peculiar advantage on horseback.

His dress, of cinnamon-coloured velvet sown with silver and pearls, set off the fairness of his complexion, and the brilliancy of his deep blue eyes; and as he held in his hand the plumed cap, which he had removed from his head, in return for the applause which had been showered upon him, the long curls of his light brown hair fell luxuriantly upon the open collar which he wore. Such were in appearance the two men, who were esteemed, and with reason, the most remarkable of their day. Such were the two men, whose names have been handed down to posterity, and who will continue to be remembered while history remains, as marking, the one by his virtues, the other by his crimes, a memorable era in the annals of Italy.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN Lorenzo and the Cardinal arrived at the Palace of the Pope, they were ushered at once into his presence. Passing through a lofty hall, which was lined with men-at-arms, the Cardinal preceded Lorenzo and the citizens who had accompanied him, up the long flight of marble steps which led to the apartments above. On each step, and at either side, stood two servants of the Pope. All wore the same magnificent livery of scarlet silk, embroidered in gold, with caps of purple velvet, looped and bordered with rich bands, upon which the cypher of his Holiness, surmounted by a mitre and triple crown, were worked in jewels. At the top of the stairs were the pages, dressed in purple and silver, and the whole length of the gallery was crowded with officers of different grades, and the attendants of the Cardinals and grand functionaries,

who had been summoned to do honour to the young Florentine.

As the door of the audience chamber opened, Lorenzo felt almost bewildered by the glare and magnificence which burst upon him. Around the throne, and extending in a semi-circle, were ranged the dignitaries of the Holy See, according to their rank. The first row was composed of the Cardinals who wore the embroidered robe of purple and the tiara of jewels; the second row contained the Bishops, who were placed on seats behind, although a little above the others, and were dressed in fine scarlet cloth, with deep capes, bordered with gold, and mitres of the same metal upon their heads. The third row, consisting of those who had only attained an inferior grade, had robes of white cloth clasped with silver; while the minor officers, filling up the space behind, were clothed simply in black.

Upon a throne blazing with jewels, sat the newly elected Pontiff, Sixtus IV. ; and as Lorenzo, having first done homage at the foot of the throne, ascended the ivory steps which led to it, that he might kiss the foot of the Pope, and receive his blessing, he

was struck with the contrast between the scene and the individual who occupied the most conspicuous place in it. The diminutive form of Sixtus seemed actually sinking under the weight of so much grandeur; and his small and pinched features, and restless grey eyes, which appeared to look with distrust upon every one who approached him, gave little idea that his intellect was equal to the exalted nature of his station.

“’Tis well, my son,” he said, after listening to the address of Lorenzo, who, in the name of the republic of Florence, offered the customary congratulations upon the accession of a new Pope. “’Tis well—the Holy Church hath need of true and honest servitors; and we, by the grace of God, her father and her head, know how to prize the love that, for her sake, is tendered to our unworthy self. We thank the citizens of Florence for this their friendly greeting; and to thee, my son, we say the honour is more great, that one of thy name should thus lay the homage of his city at our feet. As Rome is dear to Florence, so are the Medici to the father of the Holy Church. My son, we bid thee welcome.”

So saying, the Pope slightly rose from his seat,

and spreading his hands upon the head of the young man, as he bent before him, gave him his blessing. Then, re-seating himself, he received the thanks of Lorenzo for the signal favour bestowed upon him; and having made some inquiries as to the health of Piero de' Medici, and many others of the Florentine citizens, who had formerly been personally known to himself, he bowed his head, when, upon a sign from the Cardinal Borgia, who occupied the seat nearest to his Holiness, the citizens of Florence retired, and the doors of the audience chamber were closed.

Thus terminated the only interview which Sixtus IV., notwithstanding his professions of friendship, ever vouchsafed to one of the house of the Medici; yet Lorenzo, although the honour which he had received was unusual towards a simple citizen, felt a sudden conviction arise within his mind that the words and the feelings of the Pontiff were at variance with each other.

The flattery of the Cardinal Borgia, who, as he re-conducted Lorenzo to the Orsini palace, failed not to dwell upon the singular favour which had been manifested towards him, did not dispel

the impression which he had received; and he determined not to quit the Holy City without a clear understanding as to the footing upon which Rome and Florence were to be for the future, and a certainty of the redress of sundry grievances, the removal of which formed part of the business of his present mission.

But it soon appeared that business was the last thing to be thought of in the city of the Pope. Upon every attempt of Lorenzo to obtain some definite promise of an arrangement of the points which he strongly urged upon the attention of the Holy See, he was met by procrastination and objections, which, though futile, still retarded the fulfilment of his hopes; and, as if to compensate him for the disappointment which was often too evident in his manner, a constant scene of festivity occupied the hours which should have been devoted to graver pursuits.

Lorenzo, though endowed with prudence and sagacity beyond his years, was fond of pleasure, and particularly addicted both to martial exercises and the sports of the field. To gratify these inclinations, the worthy fathers of the church spared

neither trouble nor expense. So despotic was the power then exercised by those whose conduct ought to have been an example of forbearance and propriety, that excesses of all kinds were openly countenanced; and the luxury and levity which distinguished the houses of the Cardinals had passed into a proverb.

But where all transgressed as best suited their different positions and inclinations, the most regardless of restraint, and most flagrant in daring, was Roderigo Borgia.

This extraordinary man was, by birth, a Spaniard, having been born in 1431, at Valencia, and was supposed to be descended from a princely race, once claiming the crowns of Valencia and Arragon. Endowed with marvellous talent and power of intellect, he succeeded equally in all that he undertook. Perhaps it was in some degree the certainty of success which made him so deficient in perseverance; for no sooner had he obtained distinction in any profession, than he immediately abandoned it in disgust. His first renown had been gained as a lawyer; and the power of his eloquence, and

subtlety of argument, soon distanced all competitors; but in a short time Roderigo left the field open to them by embracing the profession of arms. Here his determined courage and coolness in several actions, won for him fresh laurels, and a career of glory opened to his view; when, as if disgusted by success, he suddenly relinquished his military life, and resolved to retire into the country, and live unfettered by any profession. He had, however, no sooner adopted this resolution, than, by the death of his father, he came into the possession of a splendid fortune; and, at the same time, the elevation of his uncle to the Papal throne, under the name of Calixtus III., opened to him a complete change of prospect for the future. But by the advancement of his uncle, who had always regarded him as a son, Borgia instantly determined not to profit. He was resolved not to enter public life, and contented himself with simply writing a letter of congratulation to the new Pope. Calixtus, who had ever been an ardent admirer of the powers of his nephew, was so struck by this moderation, at a moment when, on all sides, he was assailed by claimants and satellites, that he would not allow

Borgia to remain in obscurity, and instantly wrote to invite him to Rome.

Roderigo thanked him, but did not take advantage of his invitation; and before two months had elapsed, he was surprised by the arrival of a Roman prelate, bearing the nomination of Borgia to a bishopric worth 20,000 ducats a year, with a positive order instantly to repair to Rome. He could no longer hesitate; he quitted Spain, and once installed in his new dignities, abandoned himself to his natural passion for luxury and profusion. The Pope, proud of the talent and the splendour of his nephew, continued to heap upon him the means of enjoyment; and soon the magnificence of Borgia eclipsed that of the body of the Cardinals. His palace was the most sumptuous of the city; and his country house, situated at a short distance from Rome, was the scene of every species of amusement and dissipation which it was possible to imagine.

Possessed of princely revenues, which, after the death of his uncle Calixtus, were augmented by the liberality of the succeeding Popes, over whom he always contrived to exercise his powerful sway,

the establishment of the luxurious Cardinal was on a scale of magnificence which few of the Italian sovereigns could have ventured to imitate. Hunting and hawking were his favourite morning pastimes; but latterly a new pursuit had nearly superseded all others. Horse-racing had just been introduced at Rome. The late Pope, Pius II., anxious for some recreation which might distract the mind of the people from objects less agreeable to the Holy See, had instituted the first horse races which had ever been seen at Rome. In a short time, the passion for racing was at its height; and immense sums were staked upon the spirited animals, which without riders flew along the street that led to the Piazza San Marco, now known by the name of the *Corso*. This was an amusement too consonant with the character of the Borgia, not to be, in a short time, carried to excess; and his stables were soon crowded with the finest and fleetest horses, which the most extravagant outlay could procure. In this, as in other distinctions of luxury and profusion, he stood unrivalled. Though past his fortieth year, such was the beauty and spirit with which he was endowed, that he did not

seem within ten years of his age; and whether in the lists, or on the field—at the chace, or in the bower, no hand was so sure, no step so free, no smile so gay, as that of the handsome Cardinal, Roderigo Borgia.

And this was the companion who had been chosen by the Pope, to obtain, if it were possible, entire possession of the mind of Lorenzo de' Medici. Fully informed as to the capacity of him who was destined to be the future Governor of Florence, the wily Sixtus, who foresaw, in the rising greatness of that republic, the germ of a power which might eventually be dangerous to the interests of the Holy See, determined that the master spirit should be ruled by one under his own guidance.

For this purpose, he had selected Roderigo Borgia, whom intrigues for the future occupation of the Papal chair had placed completely in his power, and by a conjunction of interest rendered also inimical to any further rise of the Florentine dominion. The choice had been well made. Experience gave to the Cardinal an advantage, of which he did not fail to avail himself. Young and enthusiastic, Lorenzo readily yielded to the

fascinating influence of the gay and accomplished Roderigo, the indecorum of whose conduct was partially excused by the extreme licence of the times ; and though little mingled with respect, a warm friendship soon sprung up in the breast of the young man towards one who appeared devoted to him, and to the interests of his family. But friendship between two natures so dissimilar, could not be of long duration.

CHAPTER XI.

WHILE Rome was thus occupied with the scenes of festivity, Montesecco was lying feeble and helpless in the house of Hassan the merchant. His wound had at first assumed an alarming appearance, and for some days after his arrival, so great had been the suffering and fever it had occasioned, that he had been unable to leave his couch. Latterly, however, his strength had so much improved, that he was able to seek the refreshing shade of the garden; and there, in the society of the beautiful Melanthe, the hours passed away so softly—so joyously—and so fleetly, that their hearts had taken no heed of time, and weeks flew by, and again the hue of health returned to the cheek of Montesecco, ere he had spoken of quitting the retirement which had become so dear to him.

His thoughts, which seldom before had wandered from his duties in the field, had now taken a

different direction; and he bitterly repented the rash impulse which had urged him to bind himself to the will of another. He knew not the day, nor the hour, when his services might be commanded at a distance, and once engaged in war, who could tell what might be his fate? And if even it had been otherwise, what had Montesecco to offer? Without a home—without a name, a wanderer upon the earth, could he ask the beautiful being before him to become a wanderer like himself? Would the tented field form a fitting shelter for one nurtured in luxury, or the din of a camp, and the perils of a warrior's stronghold upon some castled steep, a meet bower for her, who, bred up in the mild seclusion of a convent, knew nothing of the ways of the world, its bitterness, or its strife? Amidst such thoughts, the mind of Montesecco turned to him who might have averted this sorrow; but remembering the sternness with which Luca Pitti had repulsed his prayer during their recent interview at Florence, he felt that he had no hope, and no right to seek the love which he already prized above his life.

And yet day after day he lingered on the spot; and although no mention of the future was ever made,

Melanthe knew that she was loved. She looked upon the speaking countenance of the young Condottiere; and though the most eloquent language of love was there, she did not shrink from its mute avowal. If her cheek crimsoned as the dark eyes of Montesecco sought hers, she did not turn from their glance; if her heart trembled as his step approached, she did not the less kindly advance to meet him. In the beautiful confidence of innocent and happy love, she felt a security in his presence, which placed all fear at a distance, and wrapped the future in a veil of peaceful delight, which she sought not to put aside. So happy was this dreaming state of love, that whenever she observed any unusual expression upon the countenance of Montesecco, her heart would sink within her, for she trembled lest a word might destroy the illusion in which she dwelt. How often does grief seem to cast its shadow before it, while the heart forebodes a sorrow, which it has no rational cause to apprehend; and when the blow has fallen, how does the recollection of that foreboding recur with double force!

One morning, Melanthe, having returned earlier than was her custom, from a visit to Clarice

Orsini, was surprised, upon entering the house of Hassan, to find that Montesecco was absent. She had been so accustomed to see him every day, that it appeared extraordinary that he should not occupy the same place; and Melanthe stood gazing with a sensation bordering on stupefaction upon the couch, beside which she had so often watched during his hours of pain.

She quitted the room, and walked through the garden to the terrace overhanging the river, where, in company with Hassan, Gennaro, and Montesecco, she had of late so happily passed the long summer evenings. Every inanimate object was as she had seen them the day before. The river gliding rapidly by—the bright sun tinting with gold the purple hills of the Campagna; and nearer to her were signs of life and joy—the butterfly still sporting on the variegated beds of flowers—the hum of the bee amongst the heavy boughs of the lemon trees—and the song of the joyous birds as they bade adieu to the deep blue sky. Melanthe thought upon all these—all that she had hitherto held so dear—all that had of late appeared yet more beautiful—then she turned to gaze upon a vacant seat by her side;

and neither the sun, nor the flowers, nor the birds, had power again to attract her eye, she saw only in the world that one spot—the spot which had been occupied by Montesecco.

It was vacant. Might it not be so again? and for ever? and for the first time Melanthe asked her heart what then would be its grief—what then would be to her the bright world around? The moment when the mind first perceives that its own power is gone, that through the heart it has yielded to another its best feelings—its warmest affections—its truest devotion—is one which, however rapturous, is not unmixed with terror. With the certainty of loving, comes the fear of not being beloved—the sensitiveness of an overstrained humility, detracting from self to invest the one beloved with virtues and qualities which make it appear impossible to approach him upon an equality. It is a beautiful weakness of woman's heart, to bow thus before a power elevated by the grandeur of her own soul and the tenderness of her love, to an ideal standard of perfection immeasurably above herself.

Melanthe experienced this feeling so exquisitely

as to cause her a sensation of alarm, which for the moment clouded her better judgment. With the idea of the love of Montesecco came a painful sense of her own insignificance. She thought of the superiority of his mind—his chivalrous sense of honour—his tried and renowned bravery and skill in the profession he had chosen—the estimation in which Hassan had told her he was held by all men; and then, as her mind reverted to qualities which, if less brilliant, were more dear, his gentleness and kindness of heart, and the many accomplishments which lent to his society so peculiar a charm—she thought of herself. What was she, that he should love her? and the humility of her heart answered, “Nothing!”

Slowly and sadly she turned from the spot upon which she had gazed, with a devotion that conjured up to her view the form which had so often lingered there. She turned away, and leaning upon the marble balustrade of the terrace, the tears which had long gathered beneath the fixed eyelid, fell slowly upon her cheek—the first sweet tears of love.

Silently they fell, but not unmarked; for in

another moment Gennaro was at her side. She tried to smile, but the effort was too great ; and she held out her hand to the poor boy, who loved her so fondly, that, to see her weep, his own eyes were suffused with tears. He took her hand, and covering it with kisses, pressed it within his own, and lifted them imploringly towards her, as if entreating her not to grieve. The intellect of Gennaro seemed to have gained double strength from the affliction under which he laboured. He appeared to comprehend everything by intuition ; and such was his devotion to Hassan and Melanthe, that, to watch their looks and the words he could not hear, and endeavour if possible to forestall their wishes, was his constant occupation and delight. To gaze upon the rapidity of expression which his countenance displayed, none could have imagined that at least the sense of hearing was denied to him ; and as turning his bright eyes upwards, he would follow the light course of the bird that warbled in the air, it appeared as though each note of joy had found its echo in the heart of him who smiled so gladly.

Every one loved the boy, and to Melanthe he was as a young brother, rendered doubly dear by

his misfortune. And now they stood together like two bright beauteous flowers, each entwining and supporting the other; and the tears of Melanthe ceased when she looked upon the sorrow of the boy, and, soothed by his mute endeavour to comfort her, she smiled once more. But the smile was checked by a sigh, as she involuntarily glanced towards the seat where she usually sat—Gennaro caught the direction of her eye—the cause of her sorrow rushed to his mind. For an instant, his face was suffused with crimson, and then, with a sob which convulsed his whole frame, he let fall the hand which he still held, and turning quickly away disappeared among the trees of the garden. His mood was often wayward; and Melanthe in a few moments had forgotten his abrupt departure—had forgotten his very existence, and the whole world, for Montesecco stood by her side.

CHAPTER XII.

BRIGHT was the smile that now wreathed the beautiful lip of Melanthe—bright and sunny as the world around and the heaven above; and the words of gladness and the low silver laugh bespoke the heart lightened of its load. But the buoyancy which had returned to her spirit, gladdened not the heart of Montesecco. She stood before him beaming with joy; and yet, as he raised his eyes to her's, the look of the young Condottiere was troubled and sad. A recollection of the foreboding of evil from which she had suffered a short time before flashed across the mind of Melanthe; yet she would not suffer it to dwell there; and fearing that the least observation might confirm the impression of sorrow he had received, she avoided all question or remark, and endeavoured, by her gay conversation, to restore the spirits of Montesecco to their usual tone. This gentle device of love was

not lost upon him for whom it was practised ; and the sigh which accompanied the smile with which he spoke, somewhat chilled the eager joy of his companion.

She turned from him for a moment, and as she did so she met the bright eyes of Gennaro, who was standing at a little distance. Without analysing the impression which led to the conviction, Melanthe knew that she had in some manner wounded the feelings of the poor boy ; and now, partly to console him, and partly from a sensation of shyness, which she could not control, she felt the presence of a third party would be a relief, and she made a sign to Gennaro to take his place at her side. Gennaro, however, did not obey ; he only shook his head, and turned down an opposite path from that on which she stood.

“ Poor Gennaro ! ” she said ; “ how I grieve to have given him pain.”

“ Why do you imagine that he suffers ? ” asked Montesecco. “ His mood, like all who are so afflicted, is changeable ; but you never could have been unkind—it is impossible.”

“ Alas ! I fear that I may have been so,” replied

Melanthe. "It was but a moment since he was all joy and life, yet now he shuns me. I would that his life were happier," she added, with a sigh.

"And yet there may be those who envy even the life that you deplore as wanting happiness," said Montesecco. "Is it not better," he continued, "never to have known a joy, than to be compelled to resign those we have learned to value?"

"Perhaps it may be," answered Melanthe; "still I cannot reconcile myself to the idea of happiness, deprived of interchange of thought. All created beings, even all inanimate nature appear to have a language of their own; and to one endowed with such quick perceptions as Gennaro, it must be misery to be cut off from all intellectual communication. I often fear that he suffers, though he never complains."

"It is scarcely in human nature to suffer in silence," replied Montesecco. "The expression of sorrow may be for a time suppressed; but sooner or later the heart's grief will tremble on the lip."

The tone in which these words were spoken thrilled through the bosom of Melanthe. She

turned her eyes to those of Montesecco, but let them fall as she marked the depth of expression in his glance. For a moment neither spoke, and when the ear of Melanthe again caught the sound of that voice so dear to her, it was lower and more sad than she had ever heard it before.

“ You, who have so much kindness to others,” he said, “ will you think it presumptuous, if I entreat for pity ?”

“ Pity !” said Melanthe, in a tone of surprise.

“ Yes, pity ;” he replied. “ It is all I ask—all I dare to ask ; and when I am gone, when I am far away, think of me—if, indeed, you think at all, with pity ; for my sorrow is more deep than I can tell.”

“ You will not leave us ?” exclaimed Melanthe, hastily.

“ Alas !” said Montesecco, “ I leave Rome this night—this very hour. An insurrection has broken out at Volterra, and I am commanded instantly to march with my troops, so as to be upon the spot in case the Pope should see fit to interfere. I ought to have been gone long since ; but I could not leave you—leave Rome, I should say, without one

word of farewell—one brief word of thanks for kindness which I never can repay ;” and, he added, in a tone almost inaudible, “ for happiness I can never know again !”

But Melanthe heard him not ; or if she did, his words fell upon the ear without reaching the sense. The first were enough—enough to wither within her breast the heart that a moment before had beat rapturously, as she listened to his voice. He was going, and what was the world now to her ?—a pathless waste—a region without a sun. The glory of her day dream was gone, the vision of joy she had conjured up had faded away before her eyes, and the chill that crept over her was all that remained, to tell how warm and bright were the hopes that had vanished.

Sick at heart, Melanthe could not answer the words which Montesecco had addressed to her ; she turned upon him a look of so much sorrow, that he at once saw the hope confirmed which he had long nourished in secret. The nature of Melanthe was not one which, under a semblance of modesty, endeavours to heighten the value of an avowal by a pretence of withholding it. She had

loved Montesecco too long to imagine that he was ignorant of the affection with which she regarded him. She knew that it was reciprocal, and had never sought to conceal her feelings. But too much occupied with present happiness, the vague manner in which she had glanced at the future, had prevented her from ever inquiring into the station or worldly advantages of him she loved ; and now, in the announcement of his sudden departure, she felt the confirmation of a terrible fear which had sometimes flashed across her mind, and she saw that they were about to be separated for ever. The grief of such a thought was too hard to bear. The colour fled from her cheek ; and, leaning on the balustrade of the terrace with one hand, while the other was pressed convulsively to her heart, she turned away her head to conceal the tears forced from her by the depth of her sorrow.

The emotion of her he so madly loved was more than the resolution of Montesecco could endure—the rapture with which he beheld the proof of his power over the heart which he coveted beyond every other possession on the earth, lit up his countenance with a sudden joy ; and drawing the hand

of Melanthe within his own, in another moment his determination to leave, unshackled by any vow, her whom he scarcely dared to hope it might be his to soothe and bless, was forgotten ; and words of passionate love had been spoken, and those dear lips, upon which trembled an avowal of the same heartfelt affection, had been pressed again and again to his own, ere he remembered the stern command, which forbade him, on pain of being cast off for ever, to link his fate with that of any one unsanctioned by him to whom he owed the obedience of a son.

There had been times when this command had weighed with Montesecco—when the voluntary promise he had given to Luca Pitti, rose up before him, and froze upon his lips the burning words in which he would have poured forth his love ; but those were the hours of reason, and when had reason aught to do with love ? It was not when the earth seemed to glide from beneath his feet—when the air and the heavens appeared as a chaos of light and joy so dazzling, that sight and sense reeled beneath its glory—when all was confusion, and thought chased thought in rapid whirling through

his brain, that Montesecco could think with measured coldness on the rash step he had taken:—the past and the future were merged in the present—in that one moment of superhuman bliss, when the certainty of being beloved first breaks upon the soul; and Montesecco, as he clasped the hand of Melanthe in his own, and kissed away the tears of joy which trembled in her eyes, forgot all save the beauteous being by his side.

Better had it been if he had remembered that the world still contained others besides her whose love had made it a paradise to him. He would not then have trembled as he marked the death-like paleness that overspread the face of her he loved, as, raising her head from the breast where it had rested, some hideous object seemed to fascinate her gaze. He would not then have felt the shock that turns the heart to stone, as, following that gaze, his eyes rested upon the fiend-like countenance of him, who had, doubtless, been a mute spectator of their transports—of him, who, of all the world, he most dreaded—of him, whose withering sneer, at such an hour, was like poison dropped upon sweet flowers—of the cold, the calculating, the insidious

Luca Pitti—the ruler of his destiny, and the bane of his existence. It was too true—Luca Pitti stood before them with his teeth set, and his eyes glaring, as though the sight of human joy was odious to his perverted spirit.

“Woman!” he said sternly, and the deep sullen tone of his voice was the knell of departing happiness, “what have you done? Know you not, that he to whom you have plighted your faith is already affianced to another?”

The shriek with which Melanthe tore herself from his arms, and fled towards the house, first recalled the bewildered senses of Montesecco. Starting from where he stood, he would have followed her, but Luca Pitti laid his hand upon his arm.

“You have disobeyed me once—I forgive you. If you re-enter that house, you are lost for ever—and she whom you love—Melanthe—will never see you more.”

“What means this mystery?” said Montesecco, angrily. “And why am I thus thwarted in the only hope I have ever dared to form? By heavens! I will not bear it.”

“It is but for the present,” said Luca Pitti, soothingly. “A little while, and you shall be free; a little while, and the power of Luca Pitti over you will have ceased. Till then, be patient—now follow me.”

CHAPTER XIII.

IN a small room, the windows of which were high from the ground, and closely barred with iron, sat four men, apparently in deep deliberation. He, who occupied the upper end of the narrow table, which stood in the centre of the room, was distinguished by little save the excessive meanness of his appearance. It would have been difficult to have recognised in the meagre individual, whose scanty habiliments bespoke almost abject poverty, the potentate who, on public occasions, was wont to show himself so gorgeously attired and surrounded, had not the cunning and restless expression which so forcibly characterised the countenance of Sixtus IV., been of that peculiar kind, which, once beheld, never could be forgotten.

He was the son of a poor fisherman of Savona ;

and although obscurity of birth does not necessarily entail degeneracy of taste, yet the squalor of his present appearance was in unison with his nature. Pomp and splendour were the masks with which he sought to delude the public; while distrust, meanness, want of faith, jealousy, and revenge, equally raged within his breast, whether that breast was covered with the robe of purple, or the frock of serge.

Clothed in the garb of a Franciscan, the order to which he had belonged previous to his elevation to the Papal chair, his head covered with a small worn-out cap of velvet, his elbows resting on the table before him, and his feet and garments carefully tucked up, upon the bars of the arm-chair, sat Sixtus, listening apparently with delighted attention to some intelligence which the Cardinal, Roderigo Borgia, was detailing to him in a low voice. The other two occupants of the chamber were Piero Acciajuoli and Francesco de' Pazzi, both Florentine nobles, banished from their native city, the one, for having openly conspired against the Medici; the other self-exiled by a rancorous jealousy which rendered their very

name too hateful to allow of an existence within its reach. These two conversed apart, as though unwilling to appear interested in the communication of Borgia to the Pope ; but the anxious glance with which they scanned the countenance of the old man, as some expression more forcible than usual escaped from his lips, showed how deep was their interest in the subject now under discussion.

But still greater was the almost trembling anxiety with which the words of Borgia were devoured by the Pope ; and more than once, a look of contempt might have been traced upon the proud and handsome face of the Cardinal, as he beheld the grasping eagerness of a man bordering on fourscore to increase the authority, and accumulate the wealth which must so soon pass from his hands. Borgia, however, had his own reasons for complying, with an almost servile submission, with the wishes of the Pope ; and although the plan which he now detailed had been for some time the subject of his thoughts, he affected to have only conceived the idea from some hints thrown out by his Holiness ; thus allowing Sixtus, who piqued himself particularly on his sagacity, to imagine that the skilful

suggestions to which he now listened were original emanations from his own brain.

And now it appeared that the conference was about to break up, 'for the Pope, raising himself from his leaning posture, threw himself back in his chair, and rubbed his withered hands together with an expression of glee bordering upon idiotcy : for a few moments all were silent ; when a low tap at the door announced a visitor, and Luca Pitti entered the apartment.

"What, alone ?" asked the Pope, with an air of consternation, "our intelligence was then untrue ?"

"May it please your Holiness, we had been rightly informed ; but upon questioning the young man, I found him in no gentle mood, and feared to bring him hither, lest he should too suddenly become possessed of our intentions. He only tarries to give some directions to such of his officers as remain in the city, ere he takes the road which he should have followed this morning."

"'Tis well," replied Sixtus ; "but why went he not forth to-day, as we had commanded ? To dally thus, bespeaks a lack of zeal that ill-becomes the name of Montesecco."

“A momentary weakness,” so please your Holiness. “It is not the first time a soldier has been lured from his high duty by a woman’s smile.”

“A woman - - - what, in Rome?” asked the Pope, with more curiosity than quite befitted his sacred calling.

“Ay, in Rome. I found the brave Condottiere exchanging love vows with a Grecian damsel—the fair Melanthe, daughter of old Hassan the merchant.”

“This must be looked to,” said the Pope seriously; “we must not have our soldiers tampered with.”

Luca Pitti had not noticed the start with which Roderigo Borgia had heard the name of Melanthe in conjunction with that of Montesecco; but as his own object was to detach the Condottiere from any tie which might interfere with his influence over him, and that he knew, from the necessity of his services, neither the Pope nor the Cardinal could be indifferent to aught that might effect his independence, he was not surprised at the sudden interest which the subject appeared to have excited in the bosom of the Cardinal, who, making a sign

to him to retire from the council table, began eagerly to question him as to every word which had passed between Melanthe and Montesecco.

But the wily Borgia had soon extracted all that Luca Pitti knew of the affair; and a laugh, more befitting the lips of a boon companion than a reverend Prelate, broke from him, as he listened to the device by which Luca Pitti had contrived to separate the lovers without giving them time for any explanation. Each had their own designs in the matter; and, as they turned from the corner where they had stood during their brief but interesting conversation, and took their places at the table where the secret council of the Pope was held, both the Cardinal and Luca Pitti separately congratulated themselves that they had outwitted each other, by making it appear as though their anxiety to keep Montesecco unshackled by any domestic tie, arose solely from disinterested and public motives.

In those days, when fraud or force were the usual principles of action,—where every partisan, however humble, became an individual of consequence, either from the knowledge he might

possess, or the advantage to which his services might be turned, it was a matter of state policy that no intelligence respecting the habits, dispositions, or connexions of such persons should be neglected. Where the falling off of one adherent might endanger a whole state, it is not surprising that a rigorous system of *espionage* should have been established. To the intriguing and narrow mind of Sixtus this was a source of never-failing interest ; and to be fully informed of every circumstance relating to the meanest of his partisans, was a point upon which he particularly prided himself. It may be imagined that the least appearance of defection in so important a personage as Montesecco, the leader of a chosen band of several thousand men, was a circumstance which would occasion no small excitement in the breasts of those to whom his co-operation was so necessary ; and it required more persuasion than Luca Pitti had anticipated, to convince the timid and suspicious old man that no danger was to be apprehended from the attachment of Montesecco and Melanthe.

“ I believe what thou sayest, my good friend,” replied Sixtus to the reiterated assurances of Luca

Pitti that all fear upon the subject was groundless. "I believe it all—and thou hast acted wisely and well. But there are other dangers. This Hassan, who thou tellest me is the maiden's father, is a man of no common mould. None can tell from whence he came, and yet his influence in the city is great—his wealth unbounded, and all the greatest merchants from Florence and from Venice flock to his house. Thus much we know, yet so cautious is his speech, that which way in policy he inclines, none may say. Some call him a spy from Venice—some a secret emissary of the Medici. The Orsini are his friends,—Clarice, the daughter of Jacopo Orsini, is the bosom friend of this Melanthe, whom Montesecco loves. Through their influence, may not the Condottiere be withdrawn from us? or," he continued, and his voice trembled as he spoke, "may he not betray us, and hold us, the Father of the Holy Church, up to the scorn of all nations?"

"Fear not," said Luca Pitti, proudly; "the heart of Montesecco will break ere it betray. This love might have been dangerous, but I trust the means I have taken will have destroyed all hope within the bosom of the maiden; and as Monte-

secco will not revisit Rome, we may trust a woman's faith for remembering the absent."

"Yes—yes," replied the Pope, apparently cheered by the smile that so seldom lighted the sullen countenance of Luca Pitti.

"We will do more—a fitting husband shall be found for the damsel; but not an Orsini. We will give her to a Colonna.—Ha! now we recollect, there is the gay young Mariano di Colonna, a youth no maiden would reject."

"It will be time enough hereafter, so please your Holiness," interposed the Cardinal, "to think of giving a nameless maiden to one of the proud Colonnas; when we have quelled the feud between their race and that of the Orsini, by crushing both—then may we risk an insult without danger of revenge."

"True—true—most prudent Borgia," said the Pope, somewhat alarmed at the possibility which the words of the Cardinal aroused in his mind. "We will think of it hereafter. And now, my friends—no doubt you would gladly know why we have thus summoned you to attend in our most secret council chamber."

All eyes were anxiously turned upon the face of the Pope, except those of the Cardinal, who sat abstracted, stroking his glossy beard with one hand, while the other played with the jewelled chain depending from his neck.

“It is to confide to you our unalterable determination to devise some plan whereby we may check the growing insolence of the Medici,” continued Sixtus, who, had he substituted the word “power,” for “insolence,” would have more nearly delivered the true meaning of his sentiments than he was wont to do. A murmur of approbation broke from the lips of the Florentine exiles, who had preserved silence during the earlier part of the discussion.

“We have none here but friends?” exclaimed Sixtus, looking timidly around, as he observed the silence of the Cardinal. A slight inclination of the head from Borgia, an intimation that he did not wish to be disturbed from his reverie before it was actually necessary, re-assured the Pope; and he continued:—“An important event has occurred. Filippo de’ Medici, Archbishop of Pisa, is dead. His loss may prove a death-blow to the influence of the family at Pisa; and the better to ensure it,

we have given the Archbishopric to Francesco Salviati."

"The most bitter enemy of the Medici," exclaimed Piero Acciajuoli; "and what say the magistrates of Florence to the appointment?"

"They have refused him possession of the Episcopal palace," replied the Pope, "and will not acknowledge the pontifical mandate."

"But," said Francesco de' Pazzi sternly, "will your Holiness submit to their dictation? If so, then farewell to any hope of recovering our rights."

"Nay, my good Francesco, you are too hasty. It was to consult you as to the best means of repressing their insolence, that we summoned you hither—you, who have been so foully wronged by the Medici. Our troops already march upon Pisa. The Florentine deputy has no force to withstand ours; therefore Salviati will sooner or later attain his rights. But it is to the future we look. On all sides is our power—the power of the Holy Church, circumscribed by the underhand influence of the Medici. This very day, we have heard that Volterra is in commotion. A mine of alum, of incalculable value, has been discovered near the

city ; the citizens claim its revenue for their state ; while the Florentine merchants have seized upon the profits. The matter has been referred by Piero to his son Lorenzo ; and not an hour since the messenger of Volterra quitted Rome, bearing back the answer of this insolent scion of the Medici, “ That sooner should Volterra be reduced to a heap of ashes, than the city of Florence yield, even the shadow of a right possessed by her meanest citizens.”

“ Bravely spoken,” exclaimed Borgia, for the first time taking part in the conversation. “ This Lorenzo, when he comes to power, will find some work for the soldiers of the Holy Church, or I much marvel.”

There was something in the nature of Borgia, which, if not noble, was yet capable of appreciating in others a pride of spirit congenial to his own. Sixtus turned a penetrating look towards him as he spoke ; but the interests of Borgia were those of the Holy See, and the sensation of distrust which had entered the bosom of Sixtus, vanished in a moment. He was about to speak again, when Francesco de’ Pazzi, rising, exclaimed—

“Is it permitted, in the presence of your Holiness, to speak without reserve?”

The Pope made a sign of assent, and Francesco continued.

“Then would I affirm most solemnly, that, if the power of the Medici be thus permitted to increase, the downfall of Rome is inevitable. Nay, I meant not,” he said, observing the start of surprise with which the Pope and the Cardinal interchanged glances, “I meant not to say that the church will be deprived of her head, or the bench of the cardinals abolished. Nor, that the palaces of the nobles will be levelled with the dust. No, Rome will still have a Pope—the Cardinals will still surround the throne—and the nobles will flock to the Palace. The body may be the same—but the spirit will be wanting. Consider the state of Italy. On the one side, Rome, and the kingdom of Naples; on the other, the republics of Venice and of Florence. Compare the advance of the last with the retrogression of the others. Compare, and tremble. Rome, impoverished, forces the unwilling mite from the people, under the sacred mask of the Jubilee; and Naples, scarce supporting herself, trembles

before the threat of a French invasion ; while Florence alone dares to brave the whole world ; and Venice, proud of her friendship, covers the seas with her galleys for the protection of the interests of the Medici. The Florentine republic will rise till it stands a monument of greatness, founded upon the ruins of all those states which have not ministered to its pride. But it is not the pride of Florence, it is the ambition of the Medici, and their influence, that will work the ruin of Italy. Their commercial relations are established in every city. The riches of the East pour into the coffers of their bankers ; and so unbounded is their wealth, that were they to call in the loans they have made to other states, more than one crowned head would see his people bankrupt. By these means, they hold in terror half the sovereigns of Europe ; by these means, the flower of the nobility of Florence are exiles in a foreign land ; and by these means, if unchecked, will every state be undermined, till all the Potentates of Europe will tremble at their nod, and the Father of the Holy See become a puppet in their hands."

" 'Tis a fearful prospect, my son," said the

Pope timidly ; “ yet we will hope, that, by the prudence of our measures, such ruin may be averted.”

“ There is but one way,” said Francesco de’ Pazzi, solemnly.

“ Prudence may do much—determination may do more.”

“ What would you suggest ?” asked the Pope anxiously.

“ The extermination, root and branch, of those who, from citizens of Florence, have become its tyrants—‘ *Death to the Medici !* ’”

These words produced an effect almost electrical upon the aged Sixtus. He looked fearfully round—drew his garments closer to his shrivelled form, while the nervous twitching of his feeble hands prevented his feeling the robe that he grasped. He gazed from one to the other of the conspirators, for so they might justly be called, but gathered no comfort from their excited looks. Then he turned his trembling glance to the broad brow of Roderigo Borgia, and the veins which had started in the old man’s forehead gradually sunk to the level of the shrivelled skin;—the

lips, which a sudden terror had blanched, resumed their blue and livid hue; and the thin fingers ceased their trembling, as the Holy Father of the Church crossed his hands upon the breast whose fears were hushed, as he beheld the calm and unmoved aspect of him whose will governed his own, and who listened with a smile of approval to a proposal of—*Murder!*

CHAPTER XIV.

IN the character of Montesecco, with a courage of unequalled daring, and a spirit of endurance seldom allied to intellect of an inferior order, was strangely blended a momentary indecision where he was personally concerned, that often marred the just conclusions to which his soundness of judgment otherwise would have led him. In no case had this been so apparent as in the nature of his communications with Luca Pitti; and so aware was the latter of this defect in the character of Montesecco, that the thralldom in which he still contrived to hold the man, upon whom Italy looked as a hero, was chiefly maintained by a constant and watchful calculation of this his only weakness. Like the depth of a river, which, by frequent sounding, renders the acute observer as familiar with all that is beneath its surface, as

though it were revealed to his sight; so had the incessant vigilance of Luca Pitti seized upon every variation of feeling in the character of the Condottiere. It was of little importance to one so crafty and designing, that the very weakness upon which he unhesitatingly practised, arose from tenderness of heart and affectionate solicitude for the wishes of others. The fear of giving pain to one who had watched over his childhood, and to whom, having never known other parents, he had always yielded the devotion of a child, had more than once interposed between Montesecco, and the spirit of independence which urged him to insist upon some disclosure relative to his birth and station.

Well did Luca Pitti know his victim! It only needed a word of reproach—a look of sorrow, to soften the gentle nature of Montesecco, and reduce him to obedience; and the concession which interest or worldly advantages could not have wrung from him, was offered up at the shrine of gratitude and affection. The struggle had often been difficult, but upon no occasion had he found an impossibility of obedience to the wishes of Luca Pitti, until the cruel mandate of the latter tore him from

the side of Melanthe; and, by the falsehood he had uttered, implying a want of faith on the part of Montesecco, estranged perhaps for ever the heart which he prized above the whole world. The master-stroke, upon which Luca Pitti so much prided himself, had well nigh been the cause of a serious quarrel between him and Montesecco; and, as they quitted the house of Hassan, so violent had been the indignation with which such an interference had been repelled, that Luca Pitti wisely determined that one who was himself labouring under so much agitation, could scarcely be a fitting counsellor in the secret chamber of the Pope, when a matter of life and death might hang upon each word incautiously uttered.

It was this which had caused Luca Pitti to return alone to the palace, from whence he had been dispatched by the Pope, to desire the presence of the Condottiere; information having been received that, though commanded to lead a portion of his troops towards Volterra, Montesecco still lingered in the city. A small body of soldiers had been dispatched early in the morning; and before Luca Pitti quitted the Condottiere, he extracted

from him a solemn promise that within an hour he would set forward with the main body.

And Montesecco had kept his promise, and soon his long lances glittered in the rays of a departing sun, and for the first time their young leader took his place with a feeling of despondency and regret, among the brave men who had so often marched at his command.

So accustomed were the citizens of Rome to the clang of armour in their streets, that few heads were turned as the clattering train of Montesecco wound along; and without interruption they passed through the gates of the city, and were soon lost to sight.

So far Montesecco had fulfilled his promise; but, in an evil hour for his resolution, as he ascended the hill on the opposite side of the river, his eye caught the dwelling of Hassan, resting beneath the shade of the beautiful plane trees which ornamented his garden. In the absence of verdure which was just visible around, the garden of Hassan was a landmark. The eyes of Montesecco were rivetted upon it. He could see the very spot, where, a few hours before, he had received the first vow of the

glowing heart of Melanthe. The terrace on which they had stood, gleamed painfully white above the dark bank of the river. Montesecco reined in his horse—he could not withdraw his eyes from the spot. There, beneath those trees, dwelt the being that he loved ; and “ perhaps,” he exclaimed, as the recollection of the harshness of Luca Pitti forced itself on his mind, “ the only being who loves me—the only one who ever has loved me ; and I abandon her at the bidding of a tyrant—abandon her at the moment when her ear is poisoned against me ; and leave a heart like her’s to gnaw itself away—a pride like her’s to writhe and wither under the idea of having been trifled with and deceived.”

It was too much to bear ; the love of Montesecco was too deep and too true, not to feel what must be the sufferings of the heart which he read by his own. One instant he glanced towards his troops—he might yet overtake them before their night’s march was over ; freed from the indecision which a short time before had cost him so dear, he turned his horse’s head towards the city, and did not slacken his speed until once again he stood before the dwelling of Hassan. Trembling with anxiety and love,

he threw himself from his horse, and entered the house. But vain was his haste—vain the hope which had added wings to his course, that a few moments would suffice to explain the dilemma in which he stood. The apartment usually occupied by Melanthe was empty. She might be in the garden. With hasty steps Montesecco traversed every well-known path. All was silent and solitary. He knew that Hassan had quitted his home the day before, on an expedition to a neighbouring convent; but where was Melanthe? Where was Gennaro? He, whose presence, though mute, ever added by his gay spirit to the joyousness of the scene? Where had he flown? In deep anxiety, Montesecco returned to the house. The servants were questioned—but no intelligence could be obtained.

“The Signora,” they said, “had not been seen for some hours. She might be at the Orsini palace—she might be at the convent—or wandering amongst the ruins, as was her constant custom.” In short, where she might be was a matter of conjecture; but one thing was certain, the dwelling of Hassan no longer sheltered the form of Melanthe;

and the heart of Montesecco grew sick, as he remembered his oath to Luca Pitti, and knew that every minute thus stolen from his duties was fraught with dishonour.

Again and again did he traverse every part of the garden, calling on the name of her he loved ; but the echo of his own voice was all the answer he received. Still, as he hesitated, the moments wore away, the light was fading from the skies, and the danger of delay increased. Alas ! what was it to him ? What was now the whole world, compared to the peace of the heart that he loved, and that, through his means, had been filled with despair ? He would have given all,—his pride of fame, his hope of station, and aspirations of glory,—to have but for one instant held the form of Melanthe to his breast, and whispered the words, “ I have not deceived thee ! ”

The thought of her contempt was more bitter than the anguish of her loss, and with a heart bursting with sorrow, Montesecco turned to depart. Taking from his bosom the tablets of vellum which he always carried, he wrote upon one of them these words :—“ The tale thou hast heard is false !

Melanthe, be faithful—be firm—we shall meet again !”

Few people in those days, save the Priests and the highest of the nobles, knew how to read or write, and therefore without fear Montesecco gave the scroll into the hands of Mariana, the aged female who was the personal attendant of Melanthe, with orders not to deliver it to any one except her mistress. This done, he mounted his horse. One moment he paused, and raised his head as if to catch upon the air the least sound that might betoken a coming footstep, but all was still and silent ; and with a deep and bitter sigh Montesecco left the spot, and soon had regained the road where he had separated from his companions.

And Melanthe ! could she have known the feelings with which Montesecco had again sought her home, what hours of misery might have been spared her ! Upon the first shock which the cruel words of Luca Pitti had occasioned, the impulse which was strongest in her mind was to hide herself if possible for ever from the gaze of Montesecco. Unconscious of all, except the bitterness of having been deceived by the person she loved, the poor

girl wandered on till weariness of body overcame the deep abstraction of her soul, and standing still for an instant, she passed her hand across her eyes, as if to clear away a mist that impeded her vision. She looked around. The spot where she found herself was strange to her. She had wandered many miles from Rome; and though she knew, by the faint crimson streak that tinged the heavens, that the time of sunset was past, and that the outskirts of the city were dangerous, not a shadow of fear entered the bosom of Melanthe.

Absorbed by one idea, which seemed to scorch her brain, her mind refused to admit a thought of less fearful power. But the fatigue she had undergone forced her to seek repose; and turning from the path, she threw herself upon the bank which overhung the river, and which was then covered by low brushwood, and a few stunted trees. Under one of these, which stood nearest to the water, Melanthe seated herself, and clasping her hands upon her knees, her eyes rested upon the deep waves of the Tiber as they rolled rapidly past. It appeared as though she counted them, so still and stedfast was her gaze; but she saw them not. Silent,

and as if frozen by the misery within her breast, she continued to sit ; and when, at last, as if with returning consciousness, she raised her head and looked above, the moon was high in the heavens, and the light of the gentle stars shone down meekly and reproachfully upon the struggle of human pride and passion. The soft beauty of the hour filled the breast of Melanthe with better feelings, and thoughts that had sprung to life from the torture she had lately endured, waned and faded, as she lifted her mind beyond the earth, with that glorious elevation of spirit which ever reminds us that a divine essence is mingled with our mortal clay. Sinking upon her knees, she raised her clasped hands to heaven, and as she prayed for comfort and support beneath her first hard trial, tears, which during the long day had not passed her strained and scorching eye-lids, poured upon her cheek. It was sad and touching, to behold the grief of that young heart, shrinking almost from itself under the blight of its early hope ; and meekly pouring out its sorrow to Him, who alone could know its bitterness and its depth ! Sharp was the pang with which Melanthe tried to tear from her

bosom the feeling which still lingered there, and long, and fervently did she pray; and when she arose from her knees, her spirit was more calm. The first grief subdued, her naturally firm mind gradually recovered its tone, and the sense of the folly and impropriety of her having so long absented herself from her home rushed to her mind. She immediately turned to retrace her steps; and following the course of the river, she had not proceeded far ere she was met by Gennaro. The poor boy had followed her, and been a mute spectator of her despondency and distress; but such was the innate delicacy of spirit with which his affection towards her filled his breast, that, like a faithful dog, he was contented to watch over her, and claim no other reward than a look, or a word of kindness!

CHAPTER XV.

SCARCELY had the sound of the footsteps of the horse which bore Montesecco in his journey, died upon the ear of Mariana, ere she had broken the promise she had given; and with Stefano, the old man who filled the office of gardener and porter in the household of Hassan, was seated in the open porch of the dwelling, and by the light of a small lamp which stood upon the table, studiously endeavouring to decipher the meaning of the few words which Montesecco had traced upon the scroll, which he had delivered to her with so many injunctions of care and secrecy. In point of care, no one was more trustworthy than Mariana; but secrecy was a virtue, which, with her garrulous propensities, could not be expected. It is true that so far she obeyed the behest of Montesecco, that from the body of the household she concealed the fact of a document so precious being in her possession;

but not to impart to a single soul the suspicions she entertained, the hopes that she had formed, and the symptoms she had observed, was an effort of moral courage, to which poor Mariana was totally unequal. Having brought out from her stores some wine which she knew to be a particular favourite with Stefano, she placed the jug before him. Then, seating herself, and leaning her hands forward to encircle the lamp, she held the scroll in every possible direction, in the hope that by some accident she might discover the meaning of words, of which she could not read a single letter.

“ Well—it is very extraordinary,” she at length exclaimed, “ that people will write in such a manner that one cannot make it out.”

“ It would be still more extraordinary if you could,” observed Stefano, “ as you do not happen to know how to read.”

“ I not know how to read !” rejoined Mariana, sharply.

“ Not a whit better than myself, and I am sure I should not know whether the letters were turned upside down or not,” replied Stefano, meekly attempting, by a confession of his own ignorance, to

subdue the curiosity which he knew always raged in the bosom of Mariana at the bare possibility of discovering a secret. "And besides, if we did, you surely would not betray the confidence reposed in you by reading the letters of the Signora."

"Letters! oh, that might be a different thing; but a scroll—an open tablet—a bit of vellum—surely there can be no secret of importance upon such a thing as that;" and she held up the writing in the face of Stefano, as if to enforce her argument.

"If there were no secret, you would not be so anxious to find out the meaning of the words," said Stefano, who, though the chosen friend and confidant of Mariano, always delighted in mortifying or annoying her—a habit not peculiar to Stefano.

"And after all, what can it be to you?"

"What can it be to me?" asked Mariana; "why, who should it be any thing to except to me, I should be glad to know. Am I not the Signora Melanthe's nurse? Did not these arms receive her the very first day she landed at Naples? Oh! that was a day; I think I see it all still before my eyes. All the poor wretches landing from the ships that had saved them from the cruel Turks!

There they came, hurrying out of the boats as if the Turks were at their heels ; and when they found themselves on dry land, oh ! to see how they knelt and prayed. And some wept, and some danced for joy—and some stood quite still, and looked so piteously around ; for they were alone—they had lost all ; women their husbands, children their fathers ! Ah ! the poor children ! that was the saddest sight of all. When our good master, Hassan, came past with an infant in his arms, a pretty smiling thing, I looked at it and blessed it ; and then he turned to me and said, ‘ Good woman, if you are a mother, take pity on this child.’ I was a mother, or rather, I had been,” continued Mariana, sobbing, “ for my sweet child was in its grave, and I took pity on that of the stranger. The Holy Virgin forgive me, but I think I loved it soon as well as my own poor little Ginevra, who is with the angels in heaven. Since then, have I not been a mother to her ? My beautiful Signora ; and our master says she is a great lady, and will one day have her rights. Ah ! well, that will be a blessed day ; and she will not forget her poor Mariana.”

“ That I am sure she will not ; she deserves to

be a queen—the good Signora ; she always praises my flowers, and gives me a new doublet twice a-year,” said Stefano, warmly.

“ But see, Mariana, the jug is empty,” and he held up the wine jug, to show that he spake the truth.

“ Well, well, wait a moment,” replied Mariana, who was again busy examining the scroll. “ But is the lamp going out, or the moon, that it is so dark, all in a moment ?” and she turned abruptly towards the entrance of the porch - - - A shadow, light and rapid as the summer cloud throws upon the waving grass, seemed to pass over the bed of flowers between the porch and a large tulip tree, which stood in advance of the group nearest the house ; but Mariana, whose sight was rather dim, could not discern further.

“ Now, my good Mariana, one more cup ere the Signora returns,” said Stefano ; “ I wonder what keeps her out so late.”

“ Oh ! she is fond of the moonlight,” said Mariana quickly ; for though secretly resolved to lecture Melanthe for her midnight ramble, she could not bear that any one else should venture to

find fault with her. "And Gennaro is with her, so there can be no fear."

"Then a little more wine, I pray you," urged Stefano. "This watching is weary work;" and he stretched himself out at full length upon the seat, supporting his head upon the table.

"Now, do not go to sleep," said Mariana, "and leave me here all alone."

"No, no, good Mariana—fetch the wine, and you will find me wakeful enough, even to read the cavalier's letter," replied Stefano laughing, and settling himself still more comfortably.

"Ah! the scroll," said Mariana; and as if recollecting its importance, she placed it carefully in the middle of the table; and recommending Stefano not to touch it, took up the jug, and went towards the house for a fresh supply of wine.

But that which Stefano had already drunk was quite sufficient to overpower his not very acute faculties, and in a short time he was fast asleep. Then once more across the broad stream of light that the moon threw upon the ground in front of the porch, trembled and flitted a shadow without shape or distinctness—a shadow that came and

went as though the branches of the tulip tree were stirred. For a moment it vanished, and then again appeared more distinct, till at length it increased to a height almost gigantic, moving along with slow and measured pace towards the house. At the same time the grating of a footstep upon the gravel might have been heard ; and a moment afterwards a solitary figure, whose frock and cowl and sandalled feet bespoke the sanctity of its calling, slowly emerged from the shade. At this unwonted hour, what errand of charity or deed of mercy can have summoned the holy father from his cell ? Is it to shrive some passing soul—to calm the terrors of a death-bed by his holy words, or to listen to the deep-drawn sigh with which some poor penitent struggles to gasp out his confession, that the minister of peace wends his noiseless way to the dwelling of Hassan ? Alas ! it is none of these. In all ages, too often has the garb of religion served as a shelter to the hypocrite ; and too often had the base and profligate Cardinal profited by the disguise his holy calling afforded, to forward his infamous schemes.

Beneath the robe of a mendicant friar, Roderigo

Borgia now crept as a cowardly spy to the house of Hassan. The vigilance of his emissaries had not failed to detect and inform him of the return of Montesecco, his subsequent departure, and the prolonged absence of Melanthe from her home. The passion he had long since conceived for her had lately increased almost to frenzy, which he found it impossible to control ; and the unexpected obstacle which had arisen in his path by the discovery of the love of Montesecco, had nearly deprived the cautious Cardinal of his habitual prudence and cunning.

The first object of Borgia was, if possible, to discover what had been the conduct of Montesecco during his hurried visit ; and determining not to trust to any one but himself, he had wrapped himself in the disguise, in which, as her confessor, during her residence at the convent, he had been in the habit of visiting Melanthe, and hastened to take the best position he could obtain close to the house of Hassan, intending, if no other opportunity offered, to enter it as a poor travelling friar, and ask for hospitality for the night. Chance, however, favoured his views in a manner for which he had

scarcely dared to hope. Every word uttered by Mariana had been distinctly heard by him, and only one step was wanting to grasp the prize he expected would contain full information of the future plans and intentions of Montesecco.

It was an anxious moment, as the Cardinal crept to the porch. His weight caused the gravel upon which he trod to sink and crackle, and more than once he paused without daring to advance his foot, lest the sound might disturb the slumber of Stefano. At length, he gained the entrance, and stood upon the marble floor ; the lamp still burned, and threw its light upon the small white tablet which the designs of Borgia had made so precious in his eyes. Never did the hand of a miser clutch his gold with a more eager grasp than did the irreverent hand of the Cardinal seize upon those few words of love, which had been the only solace of the writer, and would have been a mine of wealth to her for whose eye they had been intended. Scarcely had success crowned the dastardly act of Borgia, when the sound of approaching steps warned him to depart ; and springing from where he stood, he was soon lost in the shadow of the trees. A moment after-

wards Mariana returned to the porch ; and before she could effectually rouse Stefano from his slumbers, Melanthe, accompanied by Gennaro, stood once more by her side.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITH ill-concealed delight, Melanthe listened to the news of the visit of Montesecco. Again and again she made Mariana repeat the manner of his arrival—the hour—the very minute; and bitterly now did she regret the waywardness of spirit which had kept her from her home. The disappointment of Montesecco weighed more upon her heart than did her own sorrow; for, acquitting him instantly of any wish to deceive her, she knew how great must have been his suffering at not being able to explain to her the true meaning of the cruel words of Luca Pitti.

“ Did he leave no message ?” she asked, having, by her hurried questions, so bewildered the faculties of Mariana, as to render her utterly incapable of recollecting half of what she might otherwise have done.

“None, that I can remember,” replied the nurse, putting her hand to her forehead.

“What! not one word, to say when he would return?” said Melanthe; “he might have written - - -”

“Written,” interrupted Mariana; “Oh, Santa Madonna, that I should have forgotten it—he did write - - -”

“Where—where is the letter?” exclaimed Melanthe.

“Letter, there was no letter; only a tablet—an open scroll.”

“Open?” said Melanthe, in a tone of disappointment, for her heart had, for the instant, revelled in the idea of the first letter addressed to her by him she loved.

“Yes, open. The Signora knows poor Mariana cannot read; and if she could have done so, would not the secret have been safe with her? The silence and discretion of Mariana - - -”

“Yes—yes—I know,” interrupted Melanthe; “but, good nurse, dear nurse, the letter?”

“Nay, I tell thee it was a scroll.”

“Well, well, then, the scroll—but give it me—

where hast thou put it? Is it in thy boddice—or thy vest? Where—where is it?” and Melanthe began rapidly to examine the many folds of the ample black dress of Mariana.

“Nay, child, have patience; you do hurry me so. I remember now, I laid it on the table in the porch. Come with me—you shall see it;” and Mariana turned from the room which they had entered upon the arrival of Melanthe, and, accompanied by her and Gennaro, sought the porch, where they found Stefano still fast asleep, the lamp burning, but the scroll had disappeared.

“Where can it be?” exclaimed Mariana. “I laid it here, close beside the lamp. Get up, you lazy old creature,” she added, at the same time shaking Stefano by his arm.

“More wine,” said the suddenly aroused gardener.

“Wine! you have had too much already,—where is the tablet I laid here, by the lamp?”

“Lamp?” echoed Stefano, who was only half awake.

“There is the lamp. Corpo di Bacco! cannot

you see it and the wine jug?" and he seized upon the latter, as if about to carry it to his mouth.

"No, no, my good Stefano," said the soft voice of Melanthe; "we want a letter—some writing—that was placed by the lamp."

"Ah! the Signora returned," said Stefano, rising, and trying to recover his senses, so as to recollect exactly what had happened. "Yes, I remember, Mariana was trying to read it, and I said - - -"

"Bestia—Bestia maledetta!" cried Mariana, in no gentle tone, at the same time shaking Stefano by the shoulders; "who wants to know what you said? What have you done with the scroll?"

"I done with it! why, I never saw it since - - -"

"Now, the sweet saints grant me patience," exclaimed Mariana; "he never saw it. Look here, Signora; look here, my child; before I went to fetch that jug of wine, I placed the writing there, on that spot;" and Mariana laid her hand on the table; "the lamp there, and that useless incumbrance of a man there, upon the bench."

"No, I placed myself," began Stefano.

“Peace, fool! plague that thou art. It was ill enough done, whoever placed thee where common sense was wanting,” cried Mariana, angrily.

“Now, Signora! could the scroll have gone from the table without hands?”

“Did you see any one enter?” said Melanthe, calmly, without replying to the question of her nurse.

“No one, Signora.”

“And have you not got it, think you, in your dress?” suggested Melanthe, whose heart was sinking as she beheld the overthrow of her dearest hope.

“Certainly not,” said Stefano, beginning to untie his doublet; then suddenly pausing, “how could I have taken it, when I was fast asleep before Mariana would fetch me a drop of wine? The last thing I remember was hearing her grumbling voice, and seeing that tulip tree nodding at me, with its broad leaves wrapped about it like the good Father Anselmo’s frock.”

Melanthe started, as the name of the priest fell upon her ear; but Gennaro, who had been attentively watching what was to him a pantomime, seized the lamp, and following an idea which

appeared to have suddenly struck him, lowered the light to within a few inches of the ground; and taking his course in the direction in which Stefano had pointed, he carefully examined the dewy surface of the grass, as well as the soft gravel in front of the porch. From the gestures of Mariana, he had perfectly understood that something had been lost, which was an object of interest to Melanthe, and that Stefano was accused, although innocent. The habitual watchfulness of Gennaro immediately suggested the idea that some other person had been present; and no sooner did he observe the attention of Melanthe directed to the dark grove of trees which so nearly approached the house, than he resolved to ascertain whether any one had passed that way since the evening. For some time he could not discover any thing; but at last he came to a small open portion of the grass, upon which the mark of a sandalled foot was heavily impressed. The close green sward, saturated with dew, retained even the crossed lines formed by the leathern thongs with which the monks fastened on their sandals; and Melanthe, as she followed the invitation of Gennaro, and looked upon the discovery he had

made, too plainly read the secret which was concealed from the mind of her companions. Making a sign to Gennaro to desist from his search, and smiling to convince him that what she had lost was of little value, she bade Mariana carry the lamp to her apartment, and turning to Stefano, she said, "Has Padre Anselmo been here to-day?"

"He came at sunset past the gate, to give his blessing to poor Domenico, who lies sick on the other side of the street, and just looked in, to ask if our master had returned."

"And you told him he was still absent?"

"I said the house was empty, for the Signora had gone out; and then he asked if you were alone?"

"And what answer did you give?"

"That the Signor Gennaro was with you."

"'Tis well. Should the Holy Father inquire for me again, bid him seek me at the Convent; and, till the return of Hassan, see thou that no stranger passes within the gates."

CHAPTER XVII.

MANY days had elapsed, and yet Hassan had not returned; and at length, yielding, to the prayers of Clarice, Melanthe consented to become an inmate of the Orsini palace. Very different was the scene which its interior presented to the solitary and anxious hours she had lately passed in the seclusion of the dwelling of Hassan; for so great had been her fear of meeting the Cardinal, who, under the disguise of a Franciscan friar, constantly beset her path, that she had not ventured to leave the house.

The tranquillity of her mind had in some degree returned, and so implicit was her trust in the honour of Montesecco, that, from the time she heard of his having returned to seek her, her mind had been relieved of the horrible oppression under which it had writhed from a suspicion of his integrity. Could he not have met her eye with an unblushing brow, she knew he would not have returned. She

knew it ; and, as her mind dwelt upon the fact, her heart swelled with pride in him whom she loved ; and whom she had so honoured, that, to believe him guilty of a falsehood, had bowed her to the earth.

There is no anguish equal to that of being forced to condemn the being that we love. It is a feeling which, like most others, is not unmixed with self-love. Pity for the guilty, joins with regret and almost shame, that we could have been thus deceived, and so far blinded, as to waste a pure feeling upon one who has proved his unworthiness of so great a blessing. The dearest glory of woman's heart is the moral excellence of its idol. It is a part of the wild worship she delights to pay, and which differs widely from the nature of that which she is accustomed to receive.

The heart of Melanthe was peculiarly formed for the devotion of affection ; and the certainty that she had not been deceived in the high honour of Montesecco, was so consoling, that she resolved to endure with fortitude the separation which, before her mind had been assailed by its late disquietude,

had appeared a sorrow too deep for calm contemplation. Her anxiety with regard to the journey of Hassan daily increased. His hope that in one of the many monastic institutions with which the north of Italy abounded, Elphenor should have sought a shelter, had been so often disappointed, that Melanthe scarcely dared to encourage a sanguine feeling as to his present success. Yet at times so persuaded had she been by the assertions of Hassan that her father still lived, and was even in the neighbourhood of Rome, that she had more than once, when chance had led her abroad, forgotten all other objects in the fancied resemblance she had traced to Elphenor in some individual present.

But vain had hitherto been all the researches which the devotion of Hassan, or the filial affections of Melanthe, led them to attempt. Nothing certain had been discovered, except that, in the general massacre of the Greeks, upon the sacking of Constantinople, Elphenor had not perished, but, with many others of his country, had found a refuge in Italy. There almost all the learned Greeks had retired into monasteries; and the con-

stant habit of changing their name, to which fear had led them in the first moment of their escape, redoubled the difficulty of tracing an individual, who, having no interest in the country of his adoption, chose rather to consult his own safety by remaining unknown, than to gratify the curiosity of strangers by revealing his former name and history. Still, unchecked by disappointment, Hassan persisted in his inquiries, and his present absence was caused by intelligence, which had been mysteriously conveyed to him, that the dwelling of Elphenor had been discovered in a monastery at some distance in the Appennines. Hassan, attended only by two servants, had immediately set out upon his journey; yet when day after day elapsed, bringing no tidings of his return, Melanthe listened to the entreaty of Clarice that she would no longer seclude herself, but join in the gaieties which the sojourn of Lorenzo de' Medici had now rendered almost habitual to the Orsini palace.

“And you will confess,” said Clarice to her friend one day, when they were preparing to attend a festival given in their honour by a noble of the Orsini family, “that the life you lead here is rather

better than that which I had so much difficulty in persuading you to abandon."

"If not better, at least it is more amusing," replied Melanthe, "than sitting all day alone."

"Well, I am glad you own that," said Clarice. "As for me, now I have seen what a gay life in the city is, I only wonder how I could have endured the monotony of our convent."

"And yet, do you remember how sorry you were to leave it?" observed Melanthe; "and how bitterly you lamented having to return home to do the honours of your house to your Florentine guests?"

"Ah! that was because I did not know anything about him—about them I mean," answered Clarice, who, as she corrected herself, blushed deeply. Melanthe smiled, on observing the heightened colour of her friend; and then she sighed, for a remembrance of her own sorrow and her love made her tremble at the least symptom of any preference shown by the artless and somewhat childish Clarice.

"Do you know," said the latter, "that I have a strong suspicion that Lorenzo and the Cardinal are not on such good terms as they were?"

“What Cardinal?” asked Melanthe, surprised at the observation of her friend.

“Why the Borgia, of course. There is but one Cardinal worth looking at,” replied Clarice.

“Why should you think so?” inquired Melanthe, carelessly.

“Oh, for different reasons. You remember the hawking party the Cardinal gave us last week. Well, I overheard him muttering to himself as you rode past with Lorenzo—‘Insolence! these citizen princes would engross all!’ and several other things of the same sort. And then again, when Lorenzo had given you the green and silver brocade, for which he had sent to Florence on your admiring some that you had seen, the Cardinal happened to be present, when you went down to the great hall; he was passing through to my father’s apartment, and you did not see him; but I did, and never did I see a man look so furiously as when you stood upon the steps, and held out your hand to Lorenzo, who bent his knee as he kissed your fingers.”

“And so, from such trifles you imagine some quarrel has taken place?”

“Not exactly a quarrel; but I am sure they do

not like each other. Not that Lorenzo told me, for he never speaks seriously to me as he does to you," said Clarice simply, and her eyes filled with tears as she spoke.

"Dearest, remember I am much older, and more grave," replied Melanthe, fondly drawing the beautiful head of Clarice to her bosom. "He knows, too, the deep anxiety I suffer from the uncertainty of my poor father's fate."

"Is that all that has made you so anxious of late?" asked Clarice, smiling archly.

"It is enough to do so," said Melanthe, gravely.

To confide the deep passion that filled her heart to the ear of another, would have been almost a profanation of its sublime nature. Least of all, to the volatile Clarice could such a mind as that of Melanthe look for approval or support. The light words of her friend had, however, filled her not only with regret, but with alarm. Engrossed by her own love for Montesecco, she had scarcely marked the progress of an affection which had sprung up in the bosom of Lorenzo de' Medici towards herself. As Clarice had said, "He never spoke seriously to her;" with Melanthe he not

only spoke, but thought. In all the excursions which he delighted to make in the neighbourhood of Rome, in search of the many treasures of antiquity with which it abounded, it was ever to Melanthe that the observations and reflections of Lorenzo were addressed. When the memory of the past took the place of the interests of the present, it was to her comprehensive mind that his allusions or inquiries were submitted; while, towards Clarice, a more common-place gallantry marked his attentions. The sympathetic attraction of two minds so elevated beyond the common range of intellect, had been almost instantaneous.

Among all the proud daughters of Rome, who sighed for his notice and regard, Lorenzo had found none who sufficiently interested his thoughts to make him consider whether, in his position, it were justifiable to lay his homage at her feet. But Melanthe, once seen and known, was a being not to be forgotten; and before many days had been passed in her company, Lorenzo had decided that no care or sacrifice, on his part, should be wanting to gain her affections, and induce her to become his wife. No thought of his power and his wealth

ever suggested itself as offering any security towards the attainment of the object he had in view. To Melanthe, he knew all would be comparatively indifferent, save the intellect and high character of him to whom she gave her heart—that heart, how did Lorenzo sigh for its possession.

Lorenzo had not passed his one-and-twentieth year ; and yet the violence of the love with which Melanthe had inspired him, had changed the whole current of his thoughts ; and he looked forward with aversion to the grandeur with which the future would invest him, as he contemplated the possibility of his suit being unsuccessful. He thought of the long years during which he might be doomed to drag out an existence, only relieved from the cares of state by the society of one to whom he never could be otherwise than indifferent ; for the powerful mind of Lorenzo might sacrifice its dearest hope, but to change was not in his nature ; and every hour that he gave to deliberation upon the subject, more and more confirmed the impression he had received.

Many weeks had passed since he had enjoyed, almost without interruption, the society he so much

prized, and yet he had never dared to hazard a declaration of his affection to Melanthe. Her manner was so calm, so dignified in its kindness towards all, that Lorenzo scarcely ventured to imagine that it varied towards himself. It was true his society appeared to interest her ; it was true, that, to hear his opinion, she would frequently pause while engaged in conversation with others ; and more than once, he had felt his heart beat wildly as he marked the uplifted head and parted lips of Melanthe, as she turned, and he fancied with interest, to listen to his words. Then how they seemed to expire ere his voice could give them utterance—then how his wonted confidence would fly from him ; and he, who would fearlessly have stemmed the course of thousands by the torrent of his eloquence, now faltered before the eye of a young and gentle girl.

But Melanthe did not perceive it. Too much engrossed by her own feelings, she had lost the tact and instinct by which a woman, unshackled by her affections, can trace the windings of those of another, ere he himself is conscious of their existence. Montesecco, the soldier of fortune—the

wanderer without a name, was the idol to which every hope of Melanthe was turned. The earth held no other wealth for her. What were the palaces of the Medici? Her heart was with the homeless and the poor.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE return of Hassan being still delayed, Melanthe, whose fears had been soothed by the arrival of a message, announcing his intended journey to a more distant part of the country, remained an inmate of the Orsini Palace; and Lorenzo, whose stay in Rome was now drawing to a close, still hung upon her every accent, and watched her steps with a solicitude which had become apparent to every one save the object of it. As his love increased, so did the terrible fear which had taken possession of his mind. The indifference of Melanthe filled his heart with sorrow, but still he persevered in his attentions; for each hour he felt more deeply that to resign all hopes of her affection was an effort almost beyond his strength. Every thought was engrossed by the love with which she had inspired him; and he scarcely dared

to confess to himself the distaste with which he now regarded the objects, which before had seemed to him of paramount importance.

The negotiation of several points of interest to Florence was suspended — all subjects of grave meditation dismissed from his mind ; and even the attractions of art neglected, unless when enhanced by the smile of Melanthe. If she approved, then all glowed with the bright colouring of love ; and without her opinion, Lorenzo soon found it impossible to decide upon any thing.

One of the motives of the journey of Lorenzo to Rome had been the desire of enriching his native city with all that was most valuable in works of art ; and since his arrival he had expended enormous sums in the collection of the finest pictures, statues, and gems of all kinds with which Rome abounded ; but which were comparatively little appreciated by those who had groaned under the servitude of the late Pope, the professed foe of literature and artists. With what pleasure did Lorenzo contemplate the magnificent collection which daily increased. Each object tended to recal some happy day on which the taste and judgment of Melanthe had been con-

sulted ; and the hours thus spent Lorenzo now felt had been the happiest he had ever known.

How sad is the reflection that our sweetest visions of bliss are generally in the past ! Too soon, Lorenzo proved the bitterness of this truth. For many days a presentiment of evil had hung over his mind. Perhaps it was that mystic influence which our thoughts sometimes appear to exercise on all around us ; or perhaps it was, that Melanthe had discovered the true nature of sentiments which filled his breast ; but Lorenzo fancied that a sudden chill had fallen upon each inmate of the palace, and that more particularly Melanthe sought to avoid all conversation with him. Clarice, whose ill-disguised preference had scarcely been noticed by him, now attracted his attention by her troubled and hurried manner whenever he addressed her. Her father, Jacopo Orsini, appeared suddenly changed ; and from being wrapped up in his own consequence, now watched every movement and word of Lorenzo with a cringing servility ; and Melanthe—oh ! too surely Melanthe was no longer the same. Instead of the frank and gracious smile with which she used to meet him, he saw, with despair, a look of

measured civility, instead of the kind and friendly greeting, words of form and coldness met his ear. The change was too sudden—too cruel,—and the prudence of Lorenzo gave way. He decided at once to know the worst—he would know wherefore the little favour she had hitherto bestowed upon him was thus suddenly withdrawn; and should it prove that indifference to a passion he felt he had latterly but ill concealed was the cause, he would instantly leave Rome.

Scarcely had he come to this determination, than the mystery which had urged him to its adoption was cleared up. A messenger from Florence brought letters from Piero, announcing the startling fact of his having already commenced negotiations with Jacopo Orsini, for a marriage between Clarice and Lorenzo. The consent of Jacopo had been obtained, and it only remained now for Lorenzo to submit to the mandate, which forced upon him an alliance which he had never even contemplated as possible. The surprise with which he continued to gaze upon the words which thus annihilated all hope in his bosom, almost prevented his understanding their full meaning.

Too soon the full misery of his position became apparent. The habit of contracting persons who had never perhaps seen each other, was one of too common occurrence in that age to excite any surprise in the bosom of Lorenzo. He knew that in his position he belonged to the state; and an alliance with the Orsini was a matter of too much importance to Florence to be overlooked. It at once established the power of the Medici in the very heart of Rome; and Lorenzo, as his mind rapidly glanced towards the future difficulties in which any objection on his part must involve his country, felt his heart sicken as he reflected that perhaps the sacrifice, upon which he instantly determined, might not be appreciated by her for whose sake it would be made. His high sense of honour, fully as strongly as his affection, forbade him to yield obedience to a mandate, to which otherwise he would have bowed. How often had he expressed his readiness to sacrifice himself for his country!

In the full confidence of the willing obedience of his son, Piero had proposed the alliance to Jacopo Orsini. Lorenzo felt this; and yet he was

about to disappoint the hopes of a parent he loved. It was a bitter thought, but one which weighed almost less upon his mind than the fearful political consequences which a slight towards the proud race of the Orsini might one day entail upon Florence. The love of his country—of his native city, was almost more powerful than the affection he felt towards his father : but his love for Melanthe was far above either ; and scarcely an hour had elapsed since he had received the letter, which threatened to be so fatal to his happiness, ere he sought her presence.

Melanthe was seated in an alcove at the bottom of the garden of the Orsini palace ; and at the moment that the hurried step of Lorenzo brought him near the spot where she usually passed the mornings, it appeared as though she was occupied in drawing. A group of exquisite beauty was the model before her ; it was one of the choice relics of ancient sculpture which formed part of the collection of Lorenzo, and which had particularly attracted the attention and admiration of Melanthe. A few days before it had been a subject of common interest to them both ; and now, as the eye of

Lorenzo rested for a moment upon it, a pang shot through his heart, as he remembered the comparative happiness of that hour, when the beauty and grace of the figures, and the exquisite skill of the workmanship, had been the theme of their conversation. He paused at a little distance, to gaze upon the yet more beautiful form of Melanthe, and then perceived, what, in the hurry of the first glance he had not observed, that the marble was not more motionless than the being who gazed upon it. With eyes distended, and lips apart, Melanthe sat as though she were turned to stone. Her face was very pale—horror was upon every feature, and she grasped convulsively the implements of her drawing, which were on the table before her. So great was the shock which her appearance caused to Lorenzo, that for the moment he forgot his own hopes and fears, as he sprung to her side, and entreated her to disclose the cause of her sorrow. Roused by the sound of his voice, Melanthe turned her eyes towards him; but it was evident she had not heard his words, for in a voice hoarse from the violence of emotion she said, hurriedly, “You too have not accused me?”

“ Me? Great heavens !” exclaimed Lorenzo, “ what can you mean? Accused - - -”

“ Yes, accused,” replied Melanthe; “ accused—suspected—condemned—all in one little hour. Oh! it is hard to bear;” and she passed her hand quickly across her brow as she spoke.

“ By all that is most sacred, I conjure you to explain what has happened,” said Lorenzo.

“ I cannot,” replied Melanthe.

“ I implore,” continued Lorenzo; “ will you not confide in a friend? Who - - -”

“ Friend,” interrupted Melanthe, “ I have no friends;” and she threw herself back in her seat, and covered her face with her hands. Her attitude was one of such deep dejection, so different from her usual proud bearing, that it touched Lorenzo to the heart. He could not bear to see her grief—he would have sacrificed all, even his dearest hopes, to have been able to call back the smile to her lips. Something terrible must have occurred, though of what nature he could not form a conjecture. Sinking on his knee by her side, he once more conjured her to tell him the cause of her grief; but she remained silent, and gave no other sign of having

heard his words, than a slight motion of her hand, as if entreating him to desist from his inquiries. Lorenzo was not so easily silenced.

“Hear me,” he said, “and answer me only one word. I have not deserved this utter want of confidence—why am I thus forbidden to share your distress? Speak to me. Speak but one word—I will ask no more. Speak to me, or must I seek from others the meaning of this grief?”

“Oh! no, no,” exclaimed Melanthe wildly; “not from others—not even from me. Leave me—do not seek to know more, or seem to feel for me. You will only draw more misery upon me. I am going hence,” she said sadly, “and none will see me again. But, before we part, I will pray you to think kindly of me; and if they tell you I am worthless—vile—degraded—as they have told me. Oh God! that I should live to hear it! do not believe their words.”

“Believe them!” said Lorenzo, “I would sooner die than doubt you. Speak to me—trust me, and you will see that your confidence is not misplaced.”

The manner of Lorenzo was so respectful, and appeared so full of truth, that Melanthe felt her

scruples give way. "I will trust you," she said. "A messenger has arrived from Florence."

"Ha! how know you that?" asked Lorenzo, hastily.

"I do know it; but perhaps you do not know that the purport of his coming is no secret to the owners of this palace. It is many days since another envoy arrived with letters from your father, proposing an alliance of which he only now informs you. This, for reasons best known to Jacopo Orsini, has been kept secret from you."

"And," said Lorenzo, whose heart sunk at these words, "how can that affect your happiness?—how influence your fate?"

"It can—it does," replied Melanthe, solemnly. "Your marriage with Clarice must take place."

"Must—oh heavens!" exclaimed Lorenzo, passionately, "you wish it—you can speak such words—you who must know that my every thought is your's—that to please you I would resign all else. Melanthe, hear me—do not turn away. Will you not look upon me? You know not how much I love you—how, from the hour that we met, I first admired, then loved you; and now you bid

me—calmly bid me—wed another. Oh, unsay those words—do not tell me that I am *nothing* to you. I will endure—I have endured—so much—such torture of suspense—I did not dare to think that you could love me; and yet to doubt it was such anguish - - -”

Lorenzo paused, overcome by his emotion; and Melanthe, as she looked upon his manly sorrow, could not doubt the sincerity of his words. Her heart sunk from the bitterness of the reflection that the selfishness of her own love had been the cause of the unchecked growth of a passion which now revealed itself with such force; and in the anticipation of the terrible consequences which might ensue from it, she felt the punishment of her imprudence. One instant served for her decision; and, turning to Lorenzo, she said, “Such words are not for me—I have no longer a heart to give.”

“You love another?” exclaimed Lorenzo.

“Yes, fervently—unalterably,” replied Melanthe, solemnly.

“Then farewell happiness! farewell all!” said Lorenzo, in a tone almost inaudible. For some moments neither spoke; and Melanthe, whose

regret at what had occurred was unfeigned, did not venture to raise her eyes towards him whom she felt she had so deeply injured; but she knew that the hand which Lorenzo, as he pronounced the last words, had taken and pressed to his lips, was now wet with his tears.

“Forgive me, if I have deceived you,” she said, gently; “believe me, it was unintentional.”

“Was my love, then, so totally a matter of indifference to you, that you were not even aware of it?” asked Lorenzo, in a voice almost choked by the sobs which he in vain endeavoured to repress.

“Not so,” replied Melanthe; “but, absorbed by my own feelings, it was unsuspected by me; and when I awoke from the dream into which a selfish sorrow had plunged me, it was too late. I had yielded to the charm of your society under the safeguard of another love. My feeling towards you could be only that of friendship; and it was not until the intelligence of your being affianced to another reached me, that I felt that you - - -”

Melanthe paused, as if unable to express the conviction which had followed; and Lorenzo added, in a tone of sadness which forced the tears

from her eyes, "that I loved you. Yes, Melanthe, I did—I do love you beyond all that words can express. It is not mere admiration of your beauty, surpassing as that is; but in you I found every charm and every quality which constitutes perfection: a mind of masculine energy and strength—an intellect comprehensive and refined, blended with a true feminine gentleness and modesty—talent without ostentation, and learning without pedantry—and, withal, a depth of tenderness I fondly hoped might have been one day my own - - -"

Lorenzo ceased, for the sorrow which filled his heart was too overwhelming; a sorrow, which the sternest reason could not master; and for some moments the deep sob which burst from his breast alone broke the silence, and proved to Melanthe more deeply than words could have done, the strength of that love whose death struggle was so severe. The misery with which she looked upon the sorrow she had caused, at first dispelled the agitation under which she had been previously suffering. How could she remember herself, while beholding the grief of another; and already she

was beginning to speak words of comfort and hope of future peace to him who stood by her side, when, as Lorenzo turned from her to conceal the bitterness of the sorrow he could not repress, the folds of his mantle displaced some papers upon the table; and an open letter falling upon the floor, caught the eye of Melanthe. With a cry of pain she raised it from the ground, and holding it towards Lorenzo, bade him read the contents. "This will prove to you," she said, "that others too are unhappy!"

Lorenzo read the letter; it was from Clarice to Melanthe; a few cold lines simply informing her that, by the commands of her father, she must consider her friendship with Melanthe at an end. No word of regret, no expression of affection was added to soften the severity of the blow. The face of Lorenzo was lighted up with scorn as he finished reading the letter. "And this is the woman you desire me to love?" were the first words of reproach he addressed to Melanthe, as he trampled the writing beneath his feet.

"Oh! do not misjudge her thus," exclaimed Melanthe; "the writing is hers—but," and she

looked fearfully round, "the sentiments are another's. She only obeys her father's command. I have seen him—his mind is poisoned against me. That I should have enemies may appear strange; but I know—I fear I have one—one too," she said in a lower voice, "whom I cannot name: he alone can have dared to asperse my character—to brand the name of Melanthe with shame. It is he, who has thus worked upon the mind of Jacopo to forbid me his house—to separate me from Clarice, from all my friends;—it is he, who will take from me, one by one, all those who have watched over me from infancy—who will leave me desolate on the earth, that I may be reduced to - - - no, I cannot speak it. Oh! my father, where art thou? Merciful heaven!" she continued, as she sunk upon her knees, "if he still lives, reveal to me the place of his concealment; or, if thou hast taken him to be amongst thy blessed saints, grant that his spirit may look down upon and protect his unhappy child!" And Melanthe, as she passionately uttered this prayer, burst into tears; while Lorenzo, in his turn, roused from the contemplation of his own sorrow, besought her to disclose the name of him

whom she supposed to be the author of the calumnies which had been circulated against her. This Melanthe firmly refused to do. Such was the repugnance with which the idea of Borgia filled her mind, that to speak his name was impossible—she felt as if to utter it were contamination too dreadful to be voluntarily incurred.

“It would be of no avail,” she replied, as Lorenzo again implored her to justify herself at least in the eyes of Jacopo, so that he should not deny her the shelter of his house during the absence of Hassan. “So artfully have the tales been devised, that, in appearance at least, if not guilty, I have been too highly imprudent not to have incurred suspicion. Clarice is pure and noble, and the stranger—the orphan perhaps,—helpless, vilified, and accused, is no meet companion for the daughter of the Orsini.”

As Melanthe spoke, she had drawn herself up to her full height, and the curled lip and flashing eye were so full of the expression of truth and noble pride, that Lorenzo looked upon her almost with awe. He could have knelt at her feet, as to one not of mortal mould; for the recital of her mis-

fortune had rendered her more sacred than ever in his eyes, and restraining himself by a great effort, he said—

“ If such are the dangers that threaten you, the day may come when you may want a friend ; promise me, that, if such is the case, you will forget the presumptuous hope with which my love had inspired me, and that you will seek me.”

“ I will promise it,” said Melanthe, unhesitatingly ; and she extended her hand to him.

“ I ask no more,” said Lorenzo, in a voice of deep emotion. “ You have said that you loved another ; I do not even ask his name—or whether it is in his power to avert the storm which gathers round you. I ask not if your love be happy—nay, do not weep—I cannot bear it. I cannot—dare not—look upon your grief ; but Melanthe, ere we part, say if there is aught in which I may serve you ? ”

“ Yes,” said Melanthe, “ consent to this marriage with Clarice.”

“ Consent ! ” exclaimed Lorenzo, clasping his hands in despair, “ consent to relinquish you, and wed another—what can demand so great a sacrifice ? ”

“ My honour, and your own,” said Melanthe, solemnly ; while this, the only allusion she would make to the infamous slanders which had been coined from the nature of her intercourse with Lorenzo, and her evident influence over him, dyed her face in blushes so deep and painful, that Lorenzo, in pity for her confusion, withdrew his gaze from her countenance, and pressing her hand reverently to his lips, turned away, and in another moment he had passed from her sight.

CHAPTER XIX.

THAT day, Melanthe quitted the Orsini palace, without seeking further to justify herself. In an interview with Jacopo, which she had demanded instantly upon the receipt of the letter of Clarice, she had indignantly refuted the calumnies heaped upon her, and that in a tone so fearless and convincing, that Jacopo, had he been unbiassed by any interest of his own, might have doubted the authenticity of the facts which had been represented to him so insidiously, as to leave little doubt of the culpability of the accused. Nothing had been omitted which could tend to criminate Melanthe; and the fact of her having absented herself from her home in the company of Gennaro, during so many hours of the night, was one which, as she admitted it, while she refused to give any reason for a circumstance so unusual, strongly militated against her.

Poor Melanthe, how little did she imagine that those hours, during which she had unconsciously abandoned herself to the all-absorbing grief with which the suspicion of the faithlessness of Montesecco had overwhelmed her, would one day be brought against her as having been devoted to crime. But the very fact of their being adduced as proof of her guilt, pointed at once to her accuser. She remembered too clearly all the events of that day—the mysterious disappearance of the scroll entrusted by Montesecco to Mariana—the mark of the footsteps in the grass, and sundry dark hints which had been thrown out since, whenever, by compulsion, she had endured the company of Borgia at the palace of the Orsini—all convinced her that her accuser was no other than the Cardinal.

This conviction however, although important in relieving her mind of the fear of an unknown enemy, utterly annihilated any hope of establishing her innocence, which might otherwise have existed in her mind. The power of Borgia in Rome was absolute, his wealth unbounded, while his cunning and daring in execution made him a foe with

whom it was almost impossible to cope. No atrocity was too great for him, if, by its perpetration, he could achieve the object he had in view ; and the unmanly cruelty with which he had destroyed the reputation of an innocent girl, only proved to Melanthe that her studied avoidance had inflamed, instead of subduing, the unholy passion which raged in his bosom. Her powerful mind had instantly read the mystery of the sudden accusation preferred against her, and at once comprehended the improbability that the almost fatherly affection with which Jacopo had formerly regarded her, would withstand the united influence of the insinuations of the Cardinal and his own anxiety for the union of Clarice with Lorenzo. To remove so formidable an impediment to his wishes as the presence of a rival to his daughter was a temptation that Jacopo could not resist ; and the constant assurances of Borgia that it was against reason to hope for the accomplishment of a design, which was the dearest object of the ambition of Jacopo, while Melanthe remained an inmate of his palace, deadened any feelings of compunction which might otherwise have caused him to hesitate.

Thus all conspired to deprive Melanthe of the possibility of refuting the calumny of which she was the victim ; and such was the harshness with which she had been treated, that, having once boldly asserted her innocence, she scorned to have recourse to persuasion, where the simple truth, which was so much more in accordance with her nature, had failed. The besetting sin of Melanthe was pride ; but it was pride of a lofty nature, arising more from the consciousness of strict integrity of purpose and the belief of corresponding feelings in others, than from any desire of personal distinction. She would have exacted respect, yet was indifferent to submission or flattery ; and when conscious that she was not understood or appreciated, disdained to lower herself to the nature of ordinary mortals. At the same time that she was free from self-love, and humble as far as she was personally concerned, her mind was too full of scorn for all that was mean or vicious for one condemned to much intercourse with the world. Her ideas of mankind being derived more from her own imagination than from actual experience, she had at first established a standard of perfection by which she judged the

world; and it was, therefore, not surprising that disappointment should ensue. These romantic impressions had been considerably strengthened by the accident of her having on her first entrance into life been thrown into contact with two men so remarkable for the very qualities she admired, as Montesecco and Lorenzo de' Medici. Both were noble-minded—generous, and of highly cultivated intellect; and if the heart of Melanthe had decided in favour of the one, she was not the less ready to acknowledge the merit and endowments of the other.

She had yet to learn that all men were not as these, and too soon the vile machinations of Borgia had taught her suspicion. The conduct of Jacopo confirmed this impression, and a feeling of distrust sprung up in her heart, of which, till that moment, she would not have believed herself to have been capable. His cruelty aroused all the haughtiness of her nature.

“ Since they have condemned me, though innocent, I will depart in silence and in scorn of their injustice, and trust in heaven to clear my

name at some future day from the stain they have cast upon it."

With this exclamation, Melanthe, a few minutes after her interview with Lorenzo, had quitted the Orsini palace; and with feelings excited, by a consciousness of rectitude, to a stern dignity almost amounting to fierceness, she once again returned to the dwelling of Hassan. With what altered sensations did she re-enter the gates which led to her home—the only home she had ever known; and he, to whom she owed this and all other blessings, how her heart swelled, as she thought of him, who would now return to find the child of his adoption driven from the house of her oldest friends, a desolate and degraded being! It was a bitter thought; and though to Hassan alone she could look for support or defence, Melanthe shrunk from the dread of publicity to which her conduct would be necessarily exposed, when his anger was aroused against her persecutors. What, if the dreadful tale should reach the ear of Montesecco? Alas! when this fear first broke upon her mind, then did Melanthe feel the full misery of her position. Not

that she imagined that he would believe her guilty. Oh, no ! she was conscious that every feeling of her mind was too well known to him : but she recollected how she had suffered when he had been accused ; and the tears fell from her eyes as she thought of the bitter grief with which he would hear of the accusation against her.

The feelings of Melanthe softened as she dwelt upon the image of Montesecco ; and revived by the spirit of reliance which entered into her heart as she called to mind the constant devotion of his manner, and the fervent assurance of his love, the moment before their cruel separation, she felt she was not alone upon the earth, and resolved to exert all her fortitude in enduring with patience the sorrow that had fallen upon her.

She hoped Hassan would soon return ; and till then she determined not to quit the house, which was now her only refuge. Soothed by these reflections, she drew near her home. The first object that met her view was the figure of Gennaro ; and her heart smote her as she marked the deep dejection which his countenance and attitude portrayed. He did not see her as she entered the room—his

eyes were vacantly turned to a window which opened upon the terrace above the river ; but Melanthe perceived that the tears which had fallen were yet upon his cheek, and that cheek was very pale. Poor boy, cut off from all communion with mankind, his thoughts were too often his sole companion, and that during her absence they had been sad, was now but too evident to Melanthe. She reproached herself with selfishness and neglect, and yet it had not been her fault that he had been left alone at the villa of Hassan ; but it was not at all times in her power to control the wilful spirit of the Greek boy. From the day she had entered the Orsini palace, he had resolutely refused to stir from his home, and pity for his infirmity generally caused his lightest wish to be respected. He had been thus left to solitude, and Melanthe, satisfied with continual inquiries respecting his health, had not returned to seek him. That he had pined in her absence she perceived too plainly ; and stung with remorse for her unkind forgetfulness, she resolved to atone for it by future care, and immediately crossed the room towards the spot where he sat, and held out her hand to him.

But she was unprepared for the violence of the emotion with which her presence seemed to affect him, and the smile vanished from her lips to give place to a deadly paleness, as she beheld the frantic joy of Gennaro, and the passionate gestures of delight, which, by their extravagance, too well expressed the grief he had suffered.

Brought up together, and several years his senior, Melanthe had been too much accustomed to look upon Gennaro as a child; and it was not until she felt the burning kisses with which he covered her hands, and beheld the agony of joy which her presence occasioned, that she recollected the base slanders which had been circulated concerning her intimacy with him; and the thought struck her that the affection of Gennaro might, perhaps, be of a warmer nature than she had imagined. She looked for a moment on the almost childish countenance of the boy—he was, in fact, a child, with all its impulses—a thing made up of smiles and tears—of merriment and love. She smiled in bitter scorn as she gazed upon him; and he, mistaking the expression of her countenance, threw back his glossy curls, and laughed, and

again pressed the fingers of Melanthe to his lips : but when he saw that she was displeased—that she withdrew her hand from his eager clasp, and with an air of gloom and coldness unusual to her, quitted the room without again looking towards him—then the brightness faded from his eyes, and the colour from his cheek,—he shivered as he sat down in the spot which he had constantly occupied during her absence, and smiled no more !

CHAPTER XX.

THE total extinction of hope which the words of Melanthe had conveyed to the heart of Lorenzo, left to him no other line of conduct, than that of endeavouring, by reason, to overcome a passion which had taken possession of his whole being, to the suspension of every other faculty. It will scarcely be supposed that, in the mind of a man not yet two-and-twenty, one, who besides being an ardent admirer of beauty, and peculiarly capable of appreciating the excellence of a character like that of Melanthe, this was to be accomplished without a severe struggle. The endeavour to conceal from those around him the grief which he suffered, was the commencement of the bitter task which he now imposed upon himself; and so far was it attended with success, that to all eyes, but those of one person, did he appear as usual. Clarice alone beheld the workings of his mind. Clarice, who herself was

full of grief—grief for the loss of her friend—grief for the discomforts of her own position, affianced to one, whom her loving and therefore jealous heart told her was indifferent to her.

Though ignorant of the interview between Melanthe and Lorenzo, which would exercise so material an influence over her own fate, Clarice had always been aware of the admiration of Lorenzo for her friend; and while her heart lamented her own want of sufficient attraction, no envious or detractive feeling found place in her mind towards one whose superiority she ever gladly acknowledged. Clarice was devoid of talent and intellectual power. She might even have been denominated a common-place character, were it not that nothing is so uncommon in the breast of woman, as that gentle feeling of kindness and admiration towards those of her own sex who have been more highly gifted, which Clarice eminently possessed. It was this feeling, so genuine and honourable, that alone saved her from the meanness of jealousy, and of triumph; it was this which, while forced to obey her father, yet closed her heart against all belief of the slightest impropriety in the conduct of one, to whom she

looked as to a model of perfection ; and it was the kindly influence of this gentle and steady adherence to the friend of her childhood, that fell like balm upon the wounded spirit of Lorenzo, and won from him the first favourable opinion of the character of her, who thus alone stood up in defence of the accused.

The most consummate art could not have devised a means which would so surely have touched the heart of Lorenzo, as did the simple truth of this young and timid girl ; and the tear that glistened as she raised her eyes to those of her father, and then turned them towards the now vacant place of Melanthe, as they took their seats at the board, over which presided the stern and implacable Jacopo, went far to remove the actual horror with which Lorenzo had hitherto contemplated the alliance thus hastily forced upon him. But even this could not reconcile him to the immediate step which he knew he was expected to take. To be obliged, while his heart bled from the severity of the wound so lately inflicted, to smile upon another, to frame words of tenderness which he felt would

expire upon his lips, and to feign an interest in arrangements to him replete with disgust, was an effort beyond his strength; and he resolved to trust to time for extrication from his embarrassing position. The day might come when, by reflection and determination, he might so far subdue his regret as to make the sacrifice demanded of him: but now it was impossible—the tomb of his dearest hope was scarcely closed—would the ashes from its urn be a meet offering to a new love? Lorenzo shuddered at the thought; and Clarice, who read as if by intuition every feeling of his breast, withdrew herself yet more and more from his society and observation, with a delicacy for which she little knew how fervently Lorenzo blessed and admired her.

Not so Jacopo. The silence of Lorenzo not only disappointed his expectation, but, from its continuance, assumed the appearance of an intentional slight towards the family. The pride of the Orsini had taken alarm. It was no uncommon occurrence in that age for persons to be affianced by their parents; and having been informed of it,

allowed to advance or postpone the period of their marriage according to their own wishes, and sometimes this was done to an indefinite time.

In the case of Lorenzo, however, the matter was too important to be treated in an ordinary manner. Every day had Jacopo, wrapped up in his dignity, and inflamed with the additional importance which the proposal of Piero de' Medici had conferred, awaited a communication from Lorenzo, and looked forward with delight to the time when he should have the happiness of laying before his illustrious visitor proofs of the unblemished glory of the Orsini descent—their power, and influence in Rome; the extent of their connections with foreign princes; and the manifest advantage, as well as distinction, of obtaining the hand of the fairest daughter of their house. The vanity and pride of the old man revelled in the idea of the gratification which was in store for him; and, in anticipation of the delicious moment, he laid aside his usual stateliness, and bowed with servile humility to every fancy or opinion of his new son-in-law; while secretly he congratulated himself on having removed the

only obstacle to his wishes by the dismissal of the unfortunate Melanthe.

Still Lorenzo observed a most profound silence with regard to the expected subject; and though so young he was a man upon whose private opinions, even the self-sufficient Jacopo did not deem it safe to intrude. Day after day he endured all the tortures of suspense, and the pang of wounded pride; and bitterly did he in secret deplore his own disappointment, while he saw not that the gentle heart of Clarice was sinking with regret, and apprehension of dislike from him to whom she had secretly given her affections. Jacopo fancied that he loved his child; and after his way he did love her. Had he not separated her from Melanthe, the instant that he was apprised of the danger of their connection? and now, was he not most anxious to declare to the whole world her intended marriage with the future head of the house of Medici?

No wife ever pined for the return of her husband—no mother for that of her child, as did Jacopo for the hour when every palace in Rome should resound with the news of the betrothal of

Clarice and Lorenzo. More than once, he resolved to break through the customary usages, and himself open the communication with Lorenzo ; but it needed only a glance towards the calm and determined brow of the young Florentine to convince the conscious Jacopo, that his haste would be in vain ; for that Lorenzo would neither be led nor controlled, but would act from the result of his own reflection. And so Jacopo, chafing with pride and impatience, was constrained to remain an inactive spectator of all that passed before him.

One morning he was sitting in his own apartment, a prey to the irritation of disappointment, when he was startled by the sound of horses' feet and the clang of armour beneath his windows. It was early in the day, and at the hour when the great heat generally forbade all exercise of a military nature. The curiosity of Jacopo was aroused, and, rising from his sofa, he wrapped his loose robe of flowered silk closer round him ; and covering his thin grey hairs with a small velvet cap, he prepared to take a look into the court below, to satisfy himself as to what was going forward. This was, however, no easy matter. Though

his windows opened towards the enclosure, yet they were at some height from the ground ; and the palaces of the Italian nobles being at that time built for security, the massive wall entirely precluded all possibility of seeing into the court. Still the clamour increased ; and Jacopo, who, like any person in constant expectation of an important event long deferred, had grown nervously sensitive, and, ready to magnify the least unusual occurrence into one of fearful consequence, could not resist the anxiety which had taken possession of his mind to discover the cause of the more than ordinary bustle which reigned in the palace.

Quitting his apartment, he hastened along a corridor which led to the square turret overhanging the gateway, and mounting some rude steps, in order to reach the loop hole, he looked down into the court. The vague fears which had latterly flitted across his mind, seemed now to have been suddenly realized ; and the thin cheek of Jacopo blanched as he gazed from his hiding place, and saw the Florentine escort which had accompanied Lorenzo to Rome, ranged in front of the portico which led to the private apartments

assigned to him ;—not indeed arrayed for sport or holiday, but each soldier and war horse equipped in the light armour, without which the followers of a chief of that age never dared to travel to any distance. The sight appeared to freeze the blood of the old noble, and he stood bending down with his hands upon his knees, and his eyes strained to catch the smallest movement of the soldiers. From the place of his concealment he could only see the side of the square opposite to that upon which he stood ; and, to his amazement and dismay, in a few moments he beheld Lorenzo himself, also armed and equipped for a journey, descend the steps of the portico ; and, at a sign from one of his attendants, his charger was led to the spot.

“ Is it possible ? How ?—he is going - - - And Clarice—and the marriage - - - ” gasped Jacopo. “ And the Orsini—is it thus they are treated ? ” And the old man’s voice was choked with rage. “ Yes, thus—and by whom ? by an upstart citizen ! —citizens—merchants, after all, nothing more,—base-born merchants—bankers—Jews ! ” he exclaimed, raising his voice almost to a shriek, as he uttered what in his impotent rage he deemed were

terms of injury. "And thus, in this churlish fashion—without ceremony—without leave-taking—after all our condescension and our care ;—but it is well, one could not have expected better ; it comes from his low estate. What are the citizens of Florence ? Nothing but merchants and book-worms. And so, he is going—well, let him go ; we want not his plebeian blood - - - Ours has mingled with that of kings. I forgive him ; still, a noble had known better than thus to steal away without a word of grace ; but—soft - - -" And then for the first time the anger of Jacopo seemed to cool, and his eye brightened ; for Lorenzo, who, during the furious invectives which Jacopo, smarting with disappointment, continued to heap upon him, had stood upon the steps apparently ready to mount his horse, now motioned to his attendants to lead back the charger within the shade of the opposite wall, and himself turned as if to re-enter the palace.

"He comes to seek me," said Jacopo, in a shrill voice of delight. "After all, perhaps he is not going away—the marriage will be announced—all Rome will congratulate me—the heir of the great

house of the Medici—the son of Piero ! the grandson of the illustrious Cosmo !—the future head of the republic of Florence ! And he will be my son—the husband of Clarice ! All Europe will ring with the news. How the Colonnas will chafe, when they hear that a daughter of the Orsini has carried off the prize—a greater prize than most princes ; but I must hasten, or he will have reached my chamber before me. Yes, surely he comes to announce the marriage. Before night, his Holiness the Pope will have heard of it. How steep are these steps - - - there—there—now let me hasten to meet him.” And Jacopo, who, during these reflections, had been cautiously descending the rugged stairs, up which in the excitement of his curiosity he had clambered without perceiving their extreme steepness, now drew his cap more firmly over his brows, and gathering up his flowing robe, actually ran with all the speed he could command, the whole length of the corridor which separated him from the apartment in which he expected to find Lorenzo.

The compromise of dignity with interest is to an ordinary mind one of little difficulty ; and

Jacopo, in his eagerness to secure the rich and powerful Lorenzo for his son-in-law, forgot, that a moment before he had lavished upon him and his family every epithet of degradation which anger could devise. Breathless with haste and anxiety, Jacopo arrived at the door of his chamber. He threw it open—his wishes had not deceived him—Lorenzo was there. His appearance, however, spoke not of bridal promises or of joy. His face was very pale; he held an open letter, and Jacopo perceived that the hand which extended it towards him as he entered, trembled violently. Jacopo took the letter. The cause of all he had seen was soon explained. A few words from his brother Giuliano informed Lorenzo that his father lay at the point of death; and though conjuring him to leave Rome without delay, yet gave but slender hope that he would arrive at Florence in time to receive in person the blessing which, by Piero's commands, was delivered in the letter of Giuliano. Jacopo folded up the letter—what a death-blow to his hopes!

“My father! my dear father!” was all that Lorenzo could say; and struggling with the emotion

which overwhelmed him, he again took the fatal letter, and read it over, as if in the hope that some more favourable construction might yet be put upon the words. In silence he perused it, for Jacopo, like all persons wholly occupied with themselves, could not sufficiently control the violence of his disappointment to enable him to frame words of interest suitable to the occasion, and therefore wisely refrained from attempting to administer any comfort to his suffering guest. In a few moments Lorenzo spoke again. “ I must depart—and instantly ; but first I would offer to you my fervent thanks for the kindness and hospitality with which you welcomed me—a stranger to your city - - - ”

“ Nay, speak not of it, I pray,” said Jacopo, who was better versed in courtly compliments and dissimulation than in the gentle art of soothing the sorrowful, “ we have but poorly shown the high honour in which we hold your person and your house. The Medici, and the Orsini, have ever been friends ; and much do we lament the grief that now overshadows the dwelling of those so dear to our hearts ! ”

“ I thank you, Prince, from my heart,” replied Lorenzo. “ There is yet a favour I would beg.”

“ You have only to speak, to be obeyed,” said Jacopo, fully expecting that his daughter’s name was about to be mentioned.

“ I have remarked, of late,” replied Lorenzo, “ that his Holiness has returned but cold answers to the various demands I have been called upon to make in the name of the City of Florence ; I would have him made aware of the urgent sorrow which summons me hence, ere I can lay my homage at his feet.”

“ It shall be done,” said Jacopo ; “ I will immediately seek the Cardinal, who will carry your message to the Pope.”

“ I thank you,” replied Lorenzo, “ and now—farewell !”

“ Have you no other business ?” asked Jacopo, startled from his usual caution by the hurry of the moment. “ My daughter ! - - -”

“ Commend me to the Lady Clarice,” said Lorenzo hastily, “ and entreat her that she remember me in her prayers—for the desolate—and unhappy !” More he could not say ; for with the

name of Clarice another arose to his lips which he did not dare to utter : he turned away, and left the disappointed Jacopo standing alone in his chamber ; and whole ages of sorrow seemed to roll over the heart of Lorenzo as his thoughts reverted with agony to Melanthe, from whom he now felt as if again separated—and for ever !

CHAPTER XXI.

THE news of the departure of Lorenzo for Florence, and of the dangerous illness of Piero, produced various effects upon those in Rome who were opposed to the power of the Medici. Some looked upon it as a fatal blow to the hopes they had entertained of being able to subvert the authority of the family ; while others considered it only as a step gained towards the total extinction of the race they detested. As yet, no decided plan had been agreed upon amongst the conspirators. Contending interests made it a difficult matter to arrange ; but where the general object was of such vital importance, it soon became obvious that, if success was to be hoped for, some sacrifice of individual wishes must be effected.

Strange as it may appear to those who have formed a different idea of the imperative nature of the duties and uprightness belonging to the station

of him who was denominated "Father of the Church," the whole body of malcontents did not number one amongst them, whose virulence and determination to annihilate the family of the Medici equalled that of him, whose words should have been those of charity and peace. From the day in which, at his secret council table, he had listened to the proposal of murder, from the lips of Francesco de' Pazzi, Sixtus had been most active in the furtherance of every scheme which might carry their purpose into effect. The inflexible hatred of the Pope was the rallying point of the conspirators. In this Sixtus was not, as they had at first imagined, solely actuated by the fear of the growing power of the Medici. Views of a private nature lent their aid, and revenge of a fancied insult to one of his race, conspired to fan into flame the hatred to the Florentine rulers, which had long smouldered in his bosom. Notwithstanding his vow of celibacy, Sixtus had several sons, whom, under the false appellation of nephews, he endeavoured to advance in the world. His favourite was Girolamo Riario, upon whom he had bestowed the title of Count, and for whom he had lavished immense sums in the

purchase of various estates. The Duchy of Imola had been bought from the family of the Manfredi for forty thousand ducats; and soon after, Forli was added to the possessions of the Count. Yet all this was not sufficient to satisfy the grasping avarice of Girolamo; and he soon persuaded Sixtus to add the city of Castello to the territories with which he had already invested him. This, however, was not so easy of accomplishment. To possess himself of the city, as he had already done in some other cases, by the force of arms, was the first intention of the Pope; yet, to his surprise, he not only experienced stout resistance from the possessor, Nicolo Vitelli, but found that several of the neighbouring states lent their aid in his defence; and although unable to cope with a force so superior as that which Sixtus had assembled against him, yet succeeded by their efforts in procuring honourable terms for the city, which, at length, was obliged to capitulate.

Amongst those who had taken the most active part in the assistance afforded to the sovereign of Castello, were the rulers of the Florentine republic, who, besides the support due to a friend and ally,

had not seen without uneasiness the approach of the army of the Pope to the frontiers of their own territory. The indignation of Sixtus at thus finding the interests of a petty state preferred to the accomplishment of his wishes, was the more violent as present policy did not allow him openly to display his anger. But the insult had never been forgotten ; and for years it had rankled in his breast, ever urging him to take a signal revenge upon the instigators of the measure. The time appeared now at hand ; and, in anticipation of the services which might be required from Girolamo, should it be found that his co-operation was necessary, Sixtus had bestowed a cardinal's hat on the young Raffaele Riario, the eldest son of Girolamo, and who was a student at the University of Pisa. To such ends were, at that time, the highest offices in the church devoted.

The intelligence of the sudden departure of Lorenzo was by no means so perplexing to the Pope as to some of his accomplices. Sixtus had too much at heart the temporal glory of the station he occupied, not to be aware that any barefaced attempt upon the life of Lorenzo while he might

be accounted his guest, would be an indelible stain upon the honour and dignity of the Papal crown ; and it was to him almost a relief when the accident of Piero's illness removed Lorenzo to a distance. If not quite so practicable, it was at least safer to carry on machinations against him while at Florence ; and it was with a grim smile of satisfaction, that the old man listened to the words of Luca Pitti, as he detailed the account of the danger of Piero, which he had learned from Jacopo Orsini.

“ A good thing !—a good thing !” he exclaimed, rubbing his hands as he spoke. “ There will be one the fewer to get rid of.”

“ Yes ; but your Holiness will please to remember, that this sudden event will be the means of placing Lorenzo at once at the head of the republic—he will make friends - - -”

“ And also enemies,” observed Sixtus, lifting his cunning eyes to the face of Luca Pitti. “ Intoxicated with power, he will observe no moderation, and it will be easy to enlist on our side those whom, in the first instance, he will disgust by an abrupt denial of their claims. The body of malcontents, I am told, gathers strength every day.”

“ It has done so,” replied Luca Pitti, “ during the absence of Lorenzo ; for Piero, reduced by the violence of his disorder, is utterly incapable of action ; and Giuliano is but a boy. If we could have kept Lorenzo another month in Rome, we should have managed to have matured our plans more fully.”

“ Could not the bright eyes of some of our Roman ladies have effected this ?” inquired Sixtus, with a laugh.

“ None,” replied Luca Pitti ; “ no matron or damsel of Rome could win so much as a smile from him. He had eyes and ears but for one, and Melanthe - - -”

“ Ha !” interrupted Sixtus, “ Melanthe ! the same who won the heart of Montesecco.”

“ The same,” replied Luca Pitti ; “ the daughter of Hassan.”

“ Truly this maiden must boast of no common charms, since she thus enslaves the bravest and the greatest amongst our youth. And how fared the suit of the young Florentine ?” inquired the Pope, who was never more agreeably employed than in listening to the account of a love tale.

“ It would seem but poorly,” replied Luca Pitti, “ for she suddenly quitted the Orsini palace, and has since remained a close prisoner in the house of Hassan.”

“ I thought that Hassan was absent,” said the Pope.

“ He is so, and that makes her conduct the more extraordinary. That girl,” continued Luca Pitti, angrily, “ is ever on my path, to mar the fairest projects. Her beauty well nigh drew from me the love of Montesecco ; and now, had she smiled upon Lorenzo, even for a few weeks, our enterprise might have been completed.”

“ Nay,” said the Pope, doggedly, “ I have said it before, the blood of the Medici shall not be shed in Rome - - - and besides, where had been the use of leaving Giuliano to avenge his brother ?”

“ His death might have followed—would have followed,” replied Luca Pitti ; “ and now, by transferring the scene of our actions to Florence, we have an enemy upon the spot more difficult to subdue than the Medici themselves.”

“ Of whom do you speak ?” inquired Sixtus.

“ Of old Jacopo de’ Pazzi, the head of the

family. Could we gain him, our success is certain. At his villa of Montughi, the Medici are constant guests; it would need only a well chosen moment to accomplish all. A feast—a wedding—and, in the confusion of the hour, who could name the hand that gave the blow?”

“Ha! by the Saints! well thought of,” exclaimed the Pope, with most unholy glee; “it must be done.”

“Ay, but how?” asked Luca Pitti, gloomily. “Jacopo de’ Pazzi, alone of the family, adheres to the Medici; he is old and timid, and what weak men call conscientious, and would hesitate while he should perform.”

“He must be bought,” said Sixtus, calmly.

“Impossible,” replied Luca Pitti. “He is already rich beyond his desire; he - - -”

“My friend,” interrupted the Pope, “Four-score years have almost passed over this head—it needed but a few, a very few of them to be numbered with the past, ere I learned the truth that has ever given me power over man. All are alike venal. One may talk of conscience, another of honour, while the next holds out the ties of grati-

tude, or the blessing of independence. I listen, but mock at their self-delusion, for all are alike accessible. The difference is only in the mode. Say, where thinkest thou is the weak point of this Jacopo de' Pazzi, whose countenance thou judgest so necessary?"

"The restoration of his family to the rights and honours they formerly enjoyed in Florence, is his dearest hope," replied Luca Pitti.

"Said I not there was a road to his heart?" exclaimed the Pope, delightedly; "we must send some one to sound him. Why not depute his kinsman, Francesco, to carry our secret message?"

"Francesco has been cooler of late," replied Luca Pitti, "since your Holiness refused to bestow upon him the post which he so much coveted."

"The office of our treasurer," said Sixtus; "the very office with which we had invested Lorenzo upon his arrival in Rome."

"The very reason why Francesco de' Pazzi, his mortal enemy, would have seen him stripped of the honour. He had long coveted the office; to give it to a Medici was a direct affront to himself."

"It shall be done," said the Pope, after a few

moments deliberation. “We will dismiss Lorenzo, and bestow his place upon Francesco. We look for success—we must not be over-scrupulous about the means.”

“It is a bold step,” observed the cautious Luca Pitti.

“And therefore will lull all suspicion of our connivance at more secret measures,” replied the cunning Sixtus, who instantly perceived the cover which any open enmity with the Medici would afford.

“Tell Francesco that the office of treasurer is his own; and bid him immediately repair to Florence, nor quit it until the consent of Jacopo de’ Pazzi be gained,” added the Pope, rising, and assuming the air of authority he had laid aside during the early part of his conversation; and Luca Pitti bowed, and withdrew.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE first days of the retirement of Melanthe were full of unmitigated misery. The keenness of the blow which had fallen upon her had produced a stunning sensation, which, for a time, suspended her faculties, and she could scarcely believe in the reality of her situation. It is so difficult for a young fresh heart to imagine the wickedness and guile that abounds upon the earth, that the spirit of Melanthe was saddened as the conviction forced itself upon her mind. Her first impression, was to impute some portion of the blame to herself; and though, after a severe scrutiny of her past words and actions, she could not succeed in discovering any error, save that of having neglected appearances, her sensitive nature so magnified this trifling imprudence, that at length she persuaded herself that much of her sorrow was to be traced to her own folly.

Secure in the innocence and pride of her heart, she had not always consulted the formal precision which was customary with unmarried females of her rank; and the independence which, from the uncontrolled liberty permitted to her by the fondness of Hassan, had become a habit, she now felt would have been better exchanged for a more secluded existence. From a retrospect of other days Melanthe turned to the present; and she immediately perceived that the position into which she had been forced by the suddenness of her expulsion from the Orsini palace, was one totally incompatible with prudence.

Hassan was still absent—an absence which appeared so unusually protracted, that a vague sense of uneasiness with regard to him began to oppress her mind. His return was a moment almost equally dreaded and desired by her; but of that return she had as yet received no tidings. His anxiety to discover the retreat of Elphenor had frequently led him into many similar excursions; and at first, therefore, she had not been alarmed, especially as a message had been delivered to her from him, of a nature to allay all apprehension;

but when day after day passed by and brought no other news of the traveller, her fears returned ; and she resolved to seek some other counsel than her own as to the propriety of remaining so long in the house of Hassan with no other companion than Gennaro.

Poor Gennaro ! from the day on which his mute declaration of the affection which filled his young heart had been so chillingly received by Melanthe, he had scarcely dared to approach her, but wandered about with a forlorn and anxious air, which pierced the hearts of those who looked upon him. The nature of the boy appeared suddenly changed. His former amusements had become distasteful to him ; and he, whose tread was once as gay and light as the sportive course of the butterfly, now moved about with a slow and heavy step—his arms folded on his breast ; and too often the eyes, which used to sparkle with a brightness almost unearthly, were filled with tears. The sorrow which cannot vent itself in words, or seek relief from sympathy, is ever the most difficult to bear ; and the silent grief of the poor dumb boy soon stole the roses from his cheek, and the glad smile from his lip.

The heart of Melanthe ached as she gazed upon him, and marked the change which sorrow had wrought in his appearance. Careful, neither by look nor deed, to encourage a feeling of which she was unwilling even to acknowledge to herself the existence, she avoided his society as much as possible, thus depriving herself of her only companion. But this could not prevent her observing the deep hold which his passion had taken on the mind of the boy. Often would Melanthe, although concealed from his view, follow every movement and action of Gennaro, and see, with regret, that but one thought actuated them all. She would mark him, as he sat in the spot now chosen as his own, because it had once been her's, when, unconscious that any eye was upon him, he would draw from his bosom various trifling articles of which he had possessed himself, and which Melanthe knew to have been her own; press them to his lips, and to his heart, kissing them fondly, as had been his wont, when, in days of more unrestrained friendship, Melanthe used to give her hand to his childish caresses; and then hurriedly restore the treasures he had hoarded to their usual

hiding place, and look fearfully round, lest any one might have come within view during his stolen moments of happiness.

These and many other silent demonstrations of the love within his heart, were visible to the watchful eye of Melanthe ; and, as she beheld the symptoms of an affection which had grown up without her knowledge or desire, her heart naturally turned to thoughts both of him she loved, and of him whose love she had so lately rejected. She looked upon the grief of Gennaro, and remembering the agony of sorrow with which Lorenzo had heard the rejection of his suit, she thought of Montesecco—the beloved, the idolized of her heart, and she asked herself if he loved her as either of these had done? It is a folly to compare the affection of those who love us with that of him whom our own heart has preferred. The consciousness of the sacrifices we would gladly make for his sake, leads us to expect more than the utmost devotion can give. From expecting, we come to exacting, and then arise the unreasonable comparisons our self-love is ever ready to draw.

Melanthe, as she first admitted the dangerous

thought of comparing the love of Montesecco with that of others, experienced a bitter sensation of misery. But soon her generous nature triumphed over the fear which had begun to steal over her. She recollected the peculiarity of the position in which he was placed, one which precluded the possibility of his immediately returning to seek her ; she recollected the scroll which he had left, and which doubtless contained the assurance of his faith ! moreover, she remembered the many acts of kindness, the words of love he had spoken ; and, as she thought of them, her cheek crimsoned with delight, and her heart filled with regret for the slight suspicion her passing thoughts had cast upon his sincerity.

The more Melanthe dwelt upon the love of Montesecco, the more she considered it an imperative duty to shield a name so dear to him from all suspicion ; and she felt that after the imputation which had been cast upon her, to remain longer alone was objectionable. But where to go was the question ? Disowned by the Orsini, the friends of her youth, she dared not to claim protection from any other of the noble families in Rome ; and

kinsmen of her own, she had none. In this dilemma, her only resource was to return to the convent where she had passed so many years, and there, stating her forlorn condition, implore the protection of the Abbess, until the return of Hassan should restore her to his care. Having determined upon this step, Melanthe lost no time in putting it into execution; and leaving her house for the first time since she had returned from the Orsini palace, she took her way to the convent.

Since she had last entered its walls, what vicissitudes of life had she not experienced! She had quitted the convent, peaceful and happy, only to entangle herself in the mazes of the labyrinth of love! For a moment sunshine was upon her path, but the cloud of sorrow gathered, and darkness fell around her, shutting out the beacon of joy. Exposed as she was on all sides, what new trials might she not have to undergo! She thought of the love of Lorenzo—of poor Gennaro, and then a shudder passed over her, as she remembered the accusation which had left her friendless, and the hated name of Borgia rose to her mind.

The idea lent speed to her steps, and she hastened forward until she reached the gate of the convent. No earthborn fear of rejection stayed her hand, as she opened the wicket. She was entering the house of those who, in dedicating themselves to God, had remembered that he said, "he would have mercy and not sacrifice;" and she knew that even had she sinned, she would still be welcome there as one who repented. Nor was she disappointed. The Abbess heard her tale with true christian forbearance. Nothing was concealed by Melanthe, except her suspicion of the part which the Cardinal Borgia had played, and his identity with the Padre Anselmo, from whom, during her former residence at the convent, she had been in the habit of receiving instruction. She openly confessed her love for Montesecco, and her determination never to become the wife of another; and when her spirits had become composed, she could not forbear smiling, as the good sisters with whom she had ever been a favourite, crowded around her, each adding her exhortation to that which had been given by her predecëssor, in order to induce Melanthe to

promise that she never again would venture forth into the wicked world, but seek tranquillity within their peaceful walls. Melanthe thanked them—with words—even with tears of grateful affection ; but she could not promise obedience.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE sensations of Melanthe, on again establishing herself as a visitor at the convent, were overpowering. So keen was her delight in the certainty of protection, that for the first few days after her arrival, her mind actually revelled in repose. Her only present anxiety was caused by incessant watching for the return of Hassan. Each day, a messenger was dispatched to the house ; but Hassan did not arrive, and each day the heart of Melanthe filled with sorrow, as she saw poor Gennaro, after having deposited his daily offering of flowers at the gate of the convent, retrace his mournful steps to that home which was now doubly desolate to him.

Still Melanthe remained firm in her determination of not quitting the convent ; and the kindness of the abbess was constantly exerted to render her stay as comfortable as possible. The cells allotted to such as were mere boarders, or visitors,

were many degrees better than those with which the holy sisters contented themselves. That which Melanthe occupied was the same which had been devoted to her use during former years; and as, by the permission of the abbess, she had caused many of her own things to be brought from the house of Hassan, before long her little room presented an appearance of comfort and neatness of arrangement which called forth repeated expressions of wonder and admiration from the simple women, who, during their secluded lives, had passed their days happily without even the suspicion of the luxuries enjoyed by others. They were never weary of questioning Melanthe as to what she had seen during her stay in the great world. The glories of the palaces, the description of the dresses, the gaiety of the hunting parties, the dances, the masques, the fireworks, horse races, and fights between wild beasts;—all was new to them—all was delightful; and they listened to the accounts which she detailed for their gratification with a delight almost childish, but free from envy, or any feeling of discontent at being cut off from similar enjoyments. The dull routine of their conventual

existence seemed to have brought with it a feeling which, perhaps, it was intended it should inspire—a total blunting of sensibility; and the poor nuns, whilst they listened to Melanthe, indulged in no other remains of worldly weakness, save that of curiosity, and afterwards returned contentedly to their monotonous avocations.

But Melanthe, much as she enjoyed the repose vouchsafed to her, felt the disinclination she had always experienced for a conventual life, every day increase; and when the good abbess constantly endeavoured, by gentle reasoning, to prove its superiority over every other state of existence, Melanthe shuddered at the idea of the living grave to which she would lure her. To one of her intellect, the prison of the mind which the convent presented, was a picture more formidable by many degrees than that of the body; and narrow as was her cell, it was nothing to the narrowness that hemmed in her soul, as she listened to the conversation of those, who appeared to think that the most acceptable offering to Heaven, is a state of negative existence upon earth.

A short time sufficed to restore the tranquillity

of Melanthe, but it was not destined to endure. One morning she was sitting alone in her cell, and her spirit was less firm than it had hitherto been. Her messenger had just returned, and still no news from Hassan had reached his dwelling. The hour in which this same answer had for so many days met the ear of Melanthe, was ever one of sadness, and this day when again disappointment had fallen upon her, she felt more acutely than usual that the protracted absence of Hassan was unnatural, and a presentiment of evil fell upon her spirit. Her thoughts reverted to all that had occurred, and a deep gloom settled upon her mind as the recollection of the Cardinal made her tremble. Could she have disconnected his image from her woes, they had seemed lightened of half their load; but a secret conviction that he was the cause of all pressed upon her, and in vain she strove to shake off the belief. The cruel words of Luca Pitti, which had effected the sudden separation from Montesecco, were even ascribed by Melanthe to the influence of Borgia, though, much as he rejoiced at their effect, he had been innocent of their suggestion.

As Melanthe thought of this, her heart grew yet more bitter against the author of her misfortunes; and she began to question the prudence with which she had hitherto refrained from making known to any one the persecution to which his odious passion had subjected her. But, alas! the time had gone by when such a step had been possible. To whom could she now reveal a secret of so disgraceful a nature? The good Abbess could not even protect her, for the Cardinal was all powerful; and had it been otherwise, Melanthe shrunk from the idea of polluting the ear of the pure and timid votary of heaven with a tale so horrible and profane. She shrunk even from herself, as she thought with terror whether it could have been possible that she had ever unwittingly encouraged such degradation, as she felt the love of Borgia to be: but here her conscience came to her support, and lifting her bowed head, while her cheeks glowed with shame from the scrutiny which she had thus been forced to make of all her past intercourse with one so depraved, she sunk upon her knees before the crucifix suspended in her cell, and fervently prayed that she might henceforth be

saved from the pollution of further communication with him.

It seemed as though her words had summoned to her presence the form she so much dreaded. Scarcely had she risen from her knees, when a heavy step sounded on her ear, and the next moment Borgia stood before her. But he came not in his wonted state. His robe of pride was thrown aside ; his gorgeous attendants waited not now upon his steps ; and all the splendour with which he had often hoped to dazzle the eyes of her whose destruction he secretly compassed, was now exchanged for the loose frock and deep cowl of a poor Franciscan friar, concealing as effectually the beauty and grace of his form, as the veil of hypocrisy which he so well knew how to assume, when it suited his purpose, covered the blackness of his designing and impious heart.

The cheek of Melanthe blanched as she beheld him enter her cell, and carefully secure the door through which he had passed. But the movement which excited such terror in her breast, was merely intended as a measure of precaution against the curiosity of those who might chance to pass

that way ; for it did not form part of the system by which the Cardinal hoped one day to possess himself of his victim, to make use of any restraint or violence towards her. To carry her off at once would have been an exploit at that time attended with little difficulty and less danger ; but the Cardinal was far too much of a sensualist to be satisfied with a triumph so easily obtained. His manner towards Melanthe had ever been one of respectful adoration ; and though he had not scrupled to insult her by declarations of a love which in one of his calling never could be sanctified by marriage, yet it had always been conveyed in the most courtly strain, as if fearful to offend the modesty he so much admired.

For the nature of Borgia, reckless and profligate as it was, had in it so much of refinement, added to a penetration seldom equalled, that the fine qualities of Melanthe were not lost upon him ; and perhaps it was this very superiority over the ordinary character of other women, quite as much as the rare beauty of her person, that first inflamed his sated fancy, and inspired him with the idea of making himself loved by her whom he so ardently

admired. The repugnance with which she had always listened to his words, by no means damped his hopes. With the extent of his power he knew her to be unacquainted, and he hoped that time and assiduity would remove any impression which she might have formed against him. Ignorant of the strength of her affection for Montesecco, he calculated that absence and the difficulty of communication would soon remove a passing fancy ; and the account of Luca Pitti, as well as the words which he himself had read upon the scroll so insidiously abstracted from Mariana, left him reason to suppose that no engagement of a serious nature existed between the object of his affections, and the Condottiere.

The devotion of Lorenzo to Melanthe had been a source of extreme anxiety to Borgia. He could scarcely conceive the possibility of any woman's rejecting an alliance so splendid ; but the indifference of Melanthe soon became too obvious to remain unperceived by any person except one who was blinded by his own hopes ; and the Cardinal had merely devised the infamous plan of accusation, which had so foully prospered, in order to

deprive her of the protection of the Orsini ; a protection too powerful to admit of his prosecuting his schemes with the freedom he desired. Now, when he beheld how all his wickedness had succeeded, how did he rejoice in the invention ; and when was added the intelligence of the retreat of the unhappy girl into the convent, his heart bounded with exultation ; for Melanthe, in the convent, was more helpless and accessible than in the house of Hassan, where, in the fear of some premature discovery taking place, the Cardinal had lately forborne to intrude.

Now all danger was removed ; and Borgia, after a few days had passed, which he hoped might have the effect of making the miseries of her future position still more apparent to her, took his way to the convent, to which, in the assumed character of Confessor, he had long had free access. The duties, which were always irksome, never had appeared to him so intolerable as on that day. It seemed as if every nun in the convent had, purposely to occupy his time, committed what in the innocence of their hearts they called most heinous sins. To wearisome tales, and long-drawn confes-

sions, was the impatient Cardinal forced to listen, until his brain reeled with the irritation they caused him: but at length they came to an end; and having distributed with a lavish hand penances and fastings of different degrees among the trembling sisters, he quitted the Confessional, and made the best of his way to the spot where his impatience would long since have carried him, had he dared to pass through the Convent without the semblance at least of having performed some of his duties.

CHAPTER XXIV.

“HEAVEN’S blessing be upon thee, my daughter!” said the Cardinal, addressing Melanthe in the form of his sacred character. “Having learned that thy mind was full of anxiety for the safety of Hassan, thy father by adoption, I have come to try and minister some comfort to thee.”

“Thanks, Reverend Father !” replied Melanthe, meekly folding her hands upon the breast, which only throbbed with more terror at what she knew to be an hypocritical salutation ; “ my troubles are indeed many, and my anxiety is great.”

“ Without reason,” observed the Cardinal calmly ; “ at the appointed time, Hassan will return.”

There was something in the tone in which these words were said, that made Melanthe tremble ; and hoping, by showing her unwillingness to prolong the conversation, that she might at least confine

it to ordinary topics, she merely bowed her head, and remained silent.

“Is it permitted for me to inquire,” said Borgia blandly, “the reason why I find thee in this place, instead of enjoying the festivities of the Orsini palace?”

“I am here by my own wish,” said Melanthe, colouring at the evasion she imagined herself forced to practise. “The lady Abbess is my friend, and will protect me.”

“Scarcely so well as a Prince of the Orsini,” replied Borgia, unable to repress a look of malevolent triumph, which fortunately was unnoticed by Melanthe.

“In the house of God, none need protection from the world without.”

“True,” answered Borgia with an incredulous smile, “the sanctity of the convent is inviolable. Still, methinks it were not overpleasing to Hassan to learn that thou hadst quitted the palace of his friend with such an unkind appearance of haste.”

“I will myself inform him of the reason,” said Melanthe.

The unmanly triumph of taunting her with a

disgrace, which she believed to have been the work of his own hand, was fast arousing the indignation which at first she had resolved to suppress.

“ And why wilt thou not confide in me ?” asked Borgia gently ; “ dost thou estimate my friendship at so low a rate, or hast thou forgotten that, in other days, here, in this very cell, I have listened to thy confession ? In those days, thou thoughtest me a friend - - - ”

“ Because in those days I believed thee one, and knew not that the great Cardinal Borgia would stoop to the office of the poor Padre Anselmo, for the sake of abusing a helpless maiden’s confidence.”

“ How have I abused thy confidence ?” asked Borgia, enchanted to have provoked an accusation, which might make Melanthe depart from the cold stateliness of tone in which she had hitherto addressed him.

“ Hast thou not - - - ” she replied, but immediately added, “ but words are idle—and I would fain be alone - - - ” and rising from her seat without lifting her eyes to those of the Cardinal, she attempted to reach the door of her cell ; but the

form of Borgia instantly interposed itself, and Melanthe shrunk back in disgust.

“With all respect,” said the Cardinal, “I would crave thy presence yet a while, were it only in remembrance of the days when within these very walls my coming was welcome to thee; thou hadst not then learned to arm thy brow with scorn, and thy lips with reproach, when words of kindness met thine ear.”

Melanthe felt the blood rush to her cheek, as the soft tone in which this was spoken, seemed to convey an insinuation from which her heart revolted; but disdaining to reply to it, she merely retired a few steps from the place where she stood, and the Cardinal perceiving her determination to avoid all allusion to the subject, continued—

“Answer me but one question. Why is it that I find thee thus changed? Have I in aught offended thee? If so, I am ready to atone for it in any way thou mayest point out.”

The hypocrisy of these words was so great that Melanthe startled from her reserve, exclaiming, “Yes, there is a way; to leave me in peace, and for ever—this is all I ask.”

“And that I cannot grant,” replied Borgia.
“No, Melanthe, sooner than leave thee, will I renounce the whole world. I live but in thy sight ; my midnight dream and waking thought is still of thee alone, and to win thy love - - -”

“Speak not to me of love,” interrupted Melanthe fiercely, “the very word is poison from thy lips, the air polluted by its sound ;—while I, the wretched object of a suit so foul, am sunk to infamy in my own eyes even for having listened to its breath.”

“Nay, calm thyself,” meekly replied the Cardinal, while he gazed with passionate admiration on the beauty of Melanthe, which, inflamed by scorn, shone with increased radiance as she stood erect before him. “Calm thyself, and let thy gentle heart frame some word more kind than infamy in speaking of my love.”

“No ! none more kind, nor less true ;” answered Melanthe, “unhallowed love is infamous !”

“Yes, if it were unhallowed,” said Borgia with assumed decorum ; “but the love I crave of thee is honourable before God and man, ’tis that of holy wedlock - - -”

“Wedlock! thou a priest—a Cardinal—would I could call thee holy,” said Melanthe, with an air of such ineffable contempt, that Borgia actually winced beneath it.

“Thou forgettest that the power which makes can also unmake. There is no vow so binding but the Father of the Church can unloose at his will. When I ask thee, therefore, to be my wife, it is because I know such things are possible. Say but the word, and the next hour a dispensation from the Pope will prove to thee that the love of Borgia is no counterfeit.”

“To be thy wife,” said Melanthe, with a shudder so prolonged, that it seemed as if before her strained eyes a vision of future ages of misery and horror slowly passed.

“Yes!” replied the Cardinal, without seeming to remark the disgust painted upon her face; “and with the wife of Borgia, no crowned queen shall dare to vie. Melanthe, thou knowest not the proud eminence to which my power can raise the woman that I love. Even now, ’tis far beyond all that thou canst conceive. Honours, dignity, and wealth unbounded, are in my gift. But there shall

come a day, when all these will be as nothing; and when thy hand, Melanthe, that now upon my knees I crave, shall wield the destinies of nations; one day, the brows of Borgia will wear the Papal crown; and thou, Melanthe, thou the loved, the adored of his heart - - -"

"Peace, monster of iniquity! perjured before God and man," cried Melanthe, unable to repress her horror, as Borgia, throwing himself upon his knees before her, attempted to take her hand. "I tell thee, were thy false words true, and could the Holy Church annul those vows that bind thee to her, sooner would Melanthe be torn limb from limb than be the bride of such a one as thou."

"Thou lovest me not," said Borgia, in a tone of sorrow so deep and unfeigned, that it showed, amidst all his villainy, the dislike of Melanthe could touch his heart with real grief.

"Now, may just heaven, and all its blessed saints, bear witness to my words," said Melanthe, as, with the rapidity of light, she threw herself upon her knees before the crucifix suspended from the wall, and, raising her clasped hands above her head, exclaimed, "I hate thee with a hate as deadly,

as though thou wert some reptile whose very breath is death. Even thus I loathe thy presence—loathe myself for having listened to thy impious words. Begone,” she continued, as she rose from the ground, and with a gesture of proud contempt, pointed to the door. “Begone, ere heaven send down its wrath upon the wretch that thus, within the holy convent walls, has dared to brave the sanctity they bear, and mock the garb of Christ, by making it a cover for a sin so hideous!”

“Thou lovest another?” said Borgia, in a tone so calm, and with a manner so deliberate, that it offered a startling contrast to the violence of Melanthe.

The only answer he received was another impatient gesture from her, urging his departure; but his keen eye had marked the quivering lip of his victim, unable to repress the fear which shook her to the soul, as these words reached her ear.

“Thou lovest another,” repeated Borgia, yet more slowly, “and that other is—Montesecco!”

The word was like a spell. The eye of Melanthe fell; and though she moved not from the proud attitude she had assumed, yet the sudden

heaving of her breast, and the deep crimson of the blush which overspread her face, at once proved to Borgia that he was not mistaken; and that the feeling which he had striven to convince himself was but transient, had taken too deep a root to be easily effaced.

The cheek of Borgia reddened also. A feeling of pain so intense that, for a moment, he could not master it, sent the blood from his heart; but as the blush faded from his face, so did the dream of love from his mind, only to give place to visions of revenge. In such a breast as that of the Cardinal, the transition was instantaneous; no check had ever been placed upon his unbridled passions with impunity; and before the confusion of Melanthe had sufficiently passed away to suffer her to speak, the active imagination of Borgia had already devised the most exquisite torture which he could inflict upon those whose affection had so fatally interposed between him and the gratification of his unholy desires.

“Why should I hesitate to avow it?” said Melanthe, steadily raising her eyes to those of the

Cardinal, "Montesecco is, indeed, the chosen of my heart."

"Rash woman," said Borgia, bending a fiend-like glance upon her glowing countenance, "thou speakest as one who glories in her choice. How knowest thou that he is worthy of thy love?"

"Because I know his heart is above guile—because I know his lightest word is truth; and that within his breast no dishonourable thought ever yet found a resting place. Brave—honest—true. It is for this I love him—and glory in my love."

The sublime tenderness which lighted up the face of Melanthe, as she thus unshrinkingly bore witness to the noble qualities of Montesecco, filled the bosom of the Cardinal with rage; but still dissembling, he continued; "But yet no fitting mate for thee. His parentage unknown—a wandering soldier—the hireling of any state that barter gold for blood—is this the husband of thy choice, thou who mightest reign a queen?"

"It is himself, and not his state, I love; and to be loved of one I so reverence and honour, is, to me, more glorious than all the splendour of a crown.

His heart is the only kingdom I desire ; and while it is my own, I fear not all that malice can desire, or misfortune inflict."

As Melanthe spoke, she had entirely regained her self-possession ; and the firmness and reliance upon the love which she so prized, proved to Borgia, that he had not mistaken the line of vengeance he intended to pursue. Coming up close to the side of Melanthe, who was diverted for the moment by her reflections, from the terror of her present position, he said, in a voice so low that its hoarse whisper was as the hissing of a serpent in her ear,

" Melanthe ! thou hast despised my love—scorned my power—and trampled upon the dearest hope that dwelt within my breast ; for I did love thee—madly doated on thee, and my pride would have been to place thee on a pinnacle of greatness no other woman has ever reached. This dream thou hast destroyed, and openly avowed thy love for another—for one, whom thou dost profess to honour as well as love. Melanthe, in so much is thy nature like my own that to love to agony—to madness, is common to us both. Thou hast but one

thought—to be the wife of Montesecco—speak,” he added almost furiously, “answer me, is it not so?”

“It is,” replied Melanthe steadily; and raising her eyes devoutly to Heaven, as though to register her words.

“To give to him,” continued Borgia, in a voice almost inarticulate with passion, “all that wild worship of the soul that I would have given to thee—to dwell upon his every look and word, until thy heart, dissolving in its love, loses all sense of being, save in him. Shrink not,” he added, as Melanthe, frightened by his vehemence, and the fierce passion of his looks, covered her blushing face with her hands, “Shrink not,” he continued, while a smile of demoniacal malice played upon his livid cheek, “in anticipation of thy bliss, for by the eternal Heaven I swear, such joys are not for thee, and the love of Montesecco shall be turned to hate!”

“Never,” exclaimed Melanthe; “his truth and faith I measure by my own; and to change that, thou, proud Cardinal, with all thy boasted power, hast proved thyself most powerless.”

“That power thou mayest defy,” replied Borgia, stung to madness by the taunt which the imputa-

tion he had cast upon the faith of her lover had wrung from the lips of Melanthe. "Thou hast defied it—but none ever did so with impunity. I tell thee again, the love on which thou leanest shall fail thee. The hour will come, when, kneeling at his feet, Montesecco shall spurn thee as the vilest of thy sex; when that hour comes, think of the power thou hast this day defied; think of Roderigo Borgia, and tremble!"

A shriek burst from the lips of Melanthe, when Borgia, his lips livid with passion, his eyes glaring upon her, as though they could pierce her to the soul, advanced slowly towards her, and seizing her arm as he pronounced the last words, held it forcibly for a moment.

"Fear not," said the Cardinal, with a contemptuous laugh as he relaxed his grasp, "thy life is safe; the revenge of Borgia aims at more noble ends; the poison that works quickly is but a coward's arm."

"Oh! my father," exclaimed Melanthe mournfully, "can it be that on the same earth with thee thy child is thus beset; and thou, Hassan, alas! where art thou? All—all—abandon me."

“ Melanthe spoke these words almost unconscious of the presence of Borgia ; and when his hateful voice again roused her attention, she gazed upon him with a look of bewilderment, as he said,

“ Yes, all ! and if they did not, thinkest thou the prisons of the Holy City have not yet a dungeon for such as would cross my path. Thy father’s existence is a dream of thy brain ;—upon Hassan hast thou looked thy last ;—from the palace of the Orsini thou art an outcast ; and before yon sun has set, from these walls shalt thou be expelled. The world is before thee ; go, and wander upon its breast ; call its Princes to thy defence ; who will dare to meet the power of the Borgia ? to hide thee from the curse of his hatred ? Who will save thee from the vengeance of a heart that loved thee, and which thou hast scorned ? Yes, I once loved thee ; but now, Melanthe, listen, and tremble ; in thy own words, I say—‘ I hate thee ! ’ and the hatred of a Borgia goes hand in hand with his revenge.” And with a lingering scowl of malice, the Cardinal quitted the cell.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE door closed upon the receding figure of the Cardinal, and Melanthe was again alone ; but the pride which had hitherto sustained her began to fail, as the fearful menaces of Borgia rung in her ears. Was it possible that such words could have been addressed to her ? and what was her crime ? The greatest crime a woman could commit towards the self love and arrogance of man. She had despised his love, and in her resistance to temptation, and neglect of worldly advancement, had proved herself superior to him. The disappointment of the passion he had conceived for Melanthe was even less keen in the bosom of Borgia than the sense of the withering contempt with which she had listened to his proposals. The rejection of the insidious scheme of a formal marriage, which

he well knew would have been eagerly adopted by any woman of less uncompromising integrity than Melanthe, left him no hope that any means of persuasion would prevail. Its failure convinced him that he had the more deeply exposed his villainy ; and, smarting under the consciousness of the contempt he had so justly incurred, he quitted the presence of Melanthe, with a determination of making her punishment as severe as it was possible. No touch of pity entered his heart, for that heart was without one sentiment of generosity ; and in such natures, revenge is the only solace for injury or disappointment.

His first act was one of tyranny, for which, notwithstanding his threat, Melanthe was wholly unprepared. Scarcely had an hour elapsed since she had been released from his presence, when a gentle knock upon her door announced a visitor ; and the next moment the venerable figure of the Lady Abbess appeared. She did not speak, but with a trembling hand held out to Melanthe a paper. One look sufficed to the unhappy girl to prove that her persecutor was in earnest in his

menace of vengeance. The hateful signature of Borgia revealed to her what was incomprehensible to the Abbess. The Cardinal, as superior of her convent, was absolute within its walls ; and the order for the immediate expulsion of Melanthe, conveyed to the Abbess by the paper she now held, was a step which she knew, however unusual, did not exceed his prerogative. So despotic was the power of the fathers of the church, that all resistance to their mandates was vain ; and the tears of the good Abbess fell fast upon the head of Melanthe, as the poor girl, overcome by this sudden view of her desolate sudden position, threw herself into the arms of her only friend, and besought her not to deprive her of her protection.

“ My daughter,” said the Abbess, “ you know not what you ask. Willingly would I retain you in this holy place ; but the power is not mine. At the command of his Eminence, the Cardinal, must every bar give way. Shouldst thou remain after this order to depart, each cell would be examined, and, merciful Father, protect them ! even the faces of the youngest of our nuns might be exposed to

the rude gaze of strangers. Heaven shield our house from such a scandal !” and the pious mother crossed herself devoutly, and raised her eyes to the figure of Christ, which hung above the pallet of Melanthe.

“ But not yet—surely not yet,” exclaimed Melanthe, with a shudder ; “ let me look at the paper.”

“ Alas ! my child, we may not delay—the very hour is named, beyond which it is forbidden that you should tarry within our walls.”

“ It is so,” said Melanthe, clasping her hands in horror, for she remembered the words of Borgia, “ before the sun has set, from these walls shalt thou be expelled.”

“ Alas ! alas ! whither shall I go ?”

“ My daughter, be comforted,” said the Abbess, to whom a sudden thought seemed to have imparted hope. “ The Lady Abbess of the convent of the Spirito Santo is my near kinswoman. At my prayer she will receive you. This injunction extends only to our house. See, it is addressed to me alone :—‘ To the Lady Abbess of the convent

of the Speranza ;' no other is named in it. Yes, that is the best plan—with her you can remain in safety until the return of Hassan."

"Blessed mother of God!" said Melanthe, raising her hands to heaven, "it is thou who hast inspired this thought."

"Yes, yes, my child, let us give glory to the blessed Madonna," said the Abbess; "she will aid us in the moment of peril. But the hour advances—I must seek for other counsel in this case; we must not offend the Cardinal. I will send for Padre Anselmo, and in his care - - -"

A shriek from her companion interrupted the speech of the good Abbess, who, unused to violent emotions, and still more unacquainted with the causes from which they spring, gazed compassionately upon the terrified countenance of Melanthe, and drawing her nearer to her, she said,

"Poor child! her fear has turned her brain. Be calm, my daughter; such terrors are an offence to heaven, and the blessed saints. Look up to the sweet face of the Holy Virgin, and remember

her sufferings; and yet she feared not, but trusted in God, and is now Queen of Heaven. Kneel to her, my child, and pray that she may guide you on your way !”

Melanthe did as she was desired; and the holy nun laid her hand upon the head of the weeping girl, and repeated a short prayer.

“ I will go, mother !” said Melanthe, as she rose from her knees.

“ See, the sun has nearly set,” she added, pointing to the window, and her heart sickening as she spoke, for she thought on the words of Borgia.

“ And whither will you go, my child ?”

“ I will return home; and should I find it impossible to remain there, I will seek the asylum you have pointed out to me; but only on one condition, that you never breathe my name to him - - -” She hesitated; and the Abbess repeated,

“ To him—to whom do you mean ?”

“ To him you mentioned—to Padre Anselmo,” replied Melanthe, with difficulty overcoming her disgust on pronouncing the name so linked with all her sorrow.

“ And why so, my daughter ? you were ever an especial favourite with our confessor,” said the Abbess.

“ I fear—I believe,” stammered Melanthe, “ I have offended him of late ; but promise me, dear mother, not to speak of me to him at present, and not to tell him where I am gone.”

“ I will promise it,” replied the Abbess, looking much perplexed ; “ but the counsels of a man so holy - - -”

“ See, see, the sun sinks behind the trees,” interrupted Melanthe, who, oppressed by a nervous terror, now seemed full of impatience to depart. “ Farewell, dear mother, bless me before I go !” and Melanthe bent her head before the Abbess.

“ I do, my child,” replied the latter ; “ and may the mother of God take you to her safe keeping !”

“ Pray for me,” said Melanthe, in a hoarse voice ; “ I am alone in the world.”

A deep sob from the Abbess proved that the somewhat selfish fear she had at first entertained, that her protection of Melanthe might

entail danger or disgrace upon her convent was fast giving way to sorrow for the loss of one who had been as a daughter unto her.

“ Pray for me,” repeated Melanthe, “ and speak kindly of me to the good sisters. I cannot bid them farewell—they would weep to see me driven from their walls.” The voice of Melanthe faltered, and, for a moment, she clasped her hands over her eyes, as if to shut out some hideous vision; then, turning to the Abbess, who was vainly endeavouring to stifle feelings of sympathy and kindness, the indulgence of which her view of religion taught her to believe was sinful, she added, “ I am miserable, but not guilty—in heaven is my hope !”

With a look of sublime resignation, Melanthe raised her eyes to the crucifix, and approaching, reverently kissed the feet of the image of that Saviour in whom she trusted—then turned silently away. The weeping Abbess, who felt it indecorous to betray to the eyes of the sisterhood over whom she ruled, the grief which her austere self-government could not teach her to repress, remained within the cell, and from its small and grated

window she saw Melanthe cross the outer court of the convent. A moment afterwards the heavy swing of the iron-studded door announced that the desolate and friendless was driven from the shelter she had sought.

CHAPTER XXVI.

No joy awaited Melanthe on re-entering her former home. That word, so full of charm to some, is to others without meaning ; and Melanthe, as she looked around the vacant chambers, felt that to her it was so. No loved form was there to greet her view,—no voice of welcome sounded on her return,—all was silent and cold, and memory alone seemed to wake and watch beside the ashes of the past. Overpowered by her distress, Melanthe could not at once decide upon the course she ought to pursue. To remain where she was, appeared to her dangerous as well as imprudent ; for not only would it add weight to the calumny of which Gennaro was the object, but she also considered that her present position offered no security against the importunity and oppression of Borgia, who had

shown, by his contempt of the sanctity of the convent, how regardless he would be of all restraint, should it interfere with his plans.

The prompt execution of his first threat, had filled her soul with a terrible conviction, which in vain she struggled to repel. She now saw that his thirst for revenge was more ardent than she had originally believed ; and the helpless fear which took possession of her mind, as she pictured to herself the possibility of his conveying to the ear of Montesecco the odious calumnies of which he had contrived in Rome to render her the victim, paralysed for the moment all power of thought and action.

But the deep love which she bore to Montesecco, though it had been the first feeling to take alarm at such a prospect, soon, by its own strength and the purity of its nature, rose superior to its terrors ; and a sentiment of regret for the injury she had done him by the suspicion of his trust in her faith being shaken by the slanderous representations of others, took the place of all previous uneasiness. Secure in his affection, all her trials could be

endured ; but to merit its continuance she felt that unreserved confidence had become a duty ; and after some reflection she determined that, however painful might be the effort, no false delicacy should prevent her from disclosing to him the embarrassment of her present position. In the absence of Hassan, she had no other alternative ; and by her silence she judged that she might justly incur the reproach of having patiently endured the accusation under which she now suffered.

This decision once formed, her mind comparatively recovered its tone ; but the next difficulty which presented itself appeared almost insurmountable. The actual abode of Montesecco was unknown to her ; and at that time the danger of the roads in Italy, and consequent difficulty of communication was such, that it was necessary to send armed messengers upon any occasion of importance. This might, and probably would give publicity to a step which she wished should be a secret ; still, as no other mode of extrication from her difficulties occurred to her, she determined at all hazard to endeavour to accomplish her design.

To ascertain the part of the country in which Montesecco commanded in person was the first point. Melanthe, whose trust in her lover was not to be shaken by appearances, had constantly repelled the idea as it had arisen, that it was strange Montesecco had not himself communicated the intelligence she was about to seek ; but remembering his return, and the mysterious disappearance of the scroll he had left, she reflected that it was possible the same hidden interference might have again been made use of ; and her heart acquitted him she loved of even the semblance of neglect.

Little did Montesecco suppose that the assurance of affection and faith, which he had constantly addressed to Melanthe by the messengers dispatched from the army, had all, by the vigilance of the Cardinal, been intercepted and destroyed ; and as, in his banishment, he bewailed the caution or timidity which appeared to be the cause of his not receiving the answers he implored her to send as a relief to his sorrow, still less did he imagine that at the same moment Melanthe was endeavouring, and without success, to obtain intelligence of his movements.

For several days she dispatched Mariana to the city, with strict injunctions not to return without having obtained the information she required. It appeared as if a spell hung over the good nurse, who always came back with her head full of anecdotes, but without having ascertained the point so much desired by her mistress. Each day that Mariana had quitted the house, it seemed as though she had met with the very person who could give her full instruction upon the subject required; and yet each day had been consumed in researches which always proved fruitless, until Melanthe at last tremblingly confessed to herself, that the spell by which poor Mariana appeared bound was no other than the work of the Cardinal. It was evident that the house of Hassan was surrounded by his emissaries, and except by some bold measure of her own, she saw plainly that she never could succeed in eluding his vigilance.

The movements of so large a body of troops as he commanded, and the position of so important a personage as Montesecco, was of too much consequence to be unknown to any in Rome save the lowest class of people; and amongst these Melanthe

soon found Mariana had confined her inquiries, and, as might naturally have been expected, had received innumerable contradictory accounts.

The peculiarity of her position, induced Melanthe to have recourse to what she deemed at that moment an extreme measure ; and she resolved to address herself to one whom she otherwise would never have approached, and to request the advice of Jacopo Orsini. Having thus decided, she revealed her intention to Mariana, entreating her to accompany her ; but no persuasion could induce Mariana to listen to the proposal. With all the vehemence of an Italian, she insisted that all who were not friends were enemies. The Orsini had chosen to abandon Melanthe, her life was therefore not safe amongst them. So violent were her asseverations, although without better foundation than her own prejudices, that Mariana actually prevailed upon her mistress to forego her intended visit.

“ Wait patiently, my child,” she said, over and over again, as one evening they were discussing the point ; “ wait patiently, and the blessed Madonna will send us help.”

“ Ah !—but when ? dear Mariana. I have

wearied Our Lady with my prayers, and all in vain," replied Melanthe.

"When? Now that is so like a young girl—when? the only word they ever say. As if there were not time enough for all things. I remember the day - - -"

"Hush!" said Melanthe, "heard you no sound?"

"Nothing. Holy saints, defend us! why, how pale you look, child," exclaimed Mariana.

"I thought I heard a step," said Melanthe, drawing nearer to her nurse.

"Stefano, perhaps, in the garden - - -"

"Perhaps," answered Melanthe, though by no means assured of the fact.

"Sit down again, my child! I was just going to tell you—but first, you must remember I was born at Naples. Well, I remember the day when my poor dear - - -"

"Ah!" shrieked Melanthe, unable to control her emotions; "it was him!"

"Who? Now, by St. Januarius, I think thy poor brain is turned."

Mariana, who always addressed her Patron Saint in the hour of danger, could not look without fear

upon the face of Melanthe, for her eyes were strained towards the window, which opened to the ground, her cheeks were colourless, and a nervousness, unusual to her, seemed to contract her whole frame. Mariana hastily stepped to the window. She saw, or fancied she saw, a muffled figure glide quickly into the shade; but for once prudently forbearing to mention her impression, she contented herself with looking into the garden. No form was visible; but the wind blew into the apartment a small strip of paper which had apparently been laid upon the edge of the window frame. Melanthe sprung forward, and seized it. A glance revealed its author.

“Hast thou forgotten my words? ‘For those who cross my path, there are dungeons, or death!’” was all that the writing contained.

“I knew it—it was him. O God, protect me!” exclaimed Melanthe, sinking on her knees.

“Well, what is this? another love letter,” exclaimed Mariana, whose curiosity was doubly excited by her inability to read the writing which had fallen from the hand of Melanthe.

“A love letter, I dare be sworn; and she is

thanking the Virgin for it. Ah ! did not I tell you it would all come in good time." Mariana, as she ceased speaking, raised her eyes from the scroll she had been trying to decypher ; but the deep grief which sat upon the face of Melanthe so much alarmed the good nurse, that she instantly caught her in her arms, and, covering her hands with kisses, endeavoured to comfort her. Melanthe did not weep,—but she leaned her head against the breast of Mariana, and, by the violent trembling of her limbs, betrayed the sufferings her lips refused to speak.

" Where is Gennaro ?" she suddenly asked, for a horrible fear had entered into her mind that the affection of the poor boy for her might draw upon him the deadly eye of the Cardinal.

" He has not left the house to-day," replied Mariana. " I fear he is ill, he has scarcely stirred out since you went away, except to carry your flowers to the Convent every morning."

" Poor, poor Gennaro !" said Melanthe with a sigh, " would that Hassan were returned."

" Ah ! but why did he ever go ?" said Mariana, nodding her head up and down with an air of

peculiar sagacity. "It is not for me, a poor servant, to judge of my master's ways ; yet I do think, and I must say—indeed, I did venture to hint as much, and if the truth must be told he quite agreed with me, that is, Stefano, to whom I just happened to mention my idea upon the subject, agreed with me, that it was highly injudicious, not to say improper. No, Heaven forbid I should say such a word of my master—but injudicious—imprudent—not quite right—in fact, very wrong, to leave such a lady as the Signora, my mistress, with no one better to look after her than a poor dumb boy, who was not able to take care of himself. To be sure, as Stefano said, 'There could be no love-making, as he could not speak.' But then I replied to Stefano, 'Why, you old blockhead, can't people speak with their eyes as well as their tongues?' and then he had the impudence to tell me, 'he only wished that I would adopt that mode of expression,' as if forsooth he was not too fortunate that I should speak to him at all. Santa Maria ! one would think he was overwhelmed with my conversation, while it is well known that I never condescend to waste my words on him, or any

such idiot. Why this very day he fell fast asleep, while I was endeavouring to enlighten him with a few of my observations on the world ; and you know, my dear child, how much Mariana has seen, for you must remember all that went on at Naples. Ah ! no, you were too young, but surely - - - ”

“ It must be so,” said Melanthe, who, absorbed by her own reflections, had not heard one word that had been uttered by her nurse. “ If not, it is but my own peril—I will prepare.”

Without further explanation to her astonished companion, Melanthe crossed the room, and, unlocking a cabinet, took from one of its drawers a purse, which she placed within the folds of her dress ; then, from another recess she selected some costly rings, which she put upon her fingers ; and round her neck a chain, from which hung a small but glittering cross. The cross she pressed to her lips again and again, then hid it in her bosom, and locking the cabinet turned to leave the room.

“ To-morrow ! ” she muttered slowly, as she glided past the wondering Mariana, “ to-morrow ! ”

“ Melanthe ! my child ! ” screamed the poor

nurse, for the conviction suddenly rushed upon her that the senses of her companion were disordered.

Melanthe started, when she heard her name pronounced in so loud a tone; and her eye wandered round the room, as if in search of the speaker, and falling on the frightened face of Mariana, she stopped, and gazed upon her; and as she gazed she passed her hand over her own forehead, as if to force a recollection that would not come. But the mind, too deeply pre-occupied, refused to turn to the common cares of life, and with a vacant stare, which completed the terror of Mariana, Melanthe in a low tone uttered the words, "to-morrow!"

"Stay, stay, my child!" said the nurse, advancing towards her.

"To-morrow!" repeated Melanthe, mechanically, and without withdrawing her fixed look from the face of Mariana, though moving backwards to avoid her embrace.

"Oh Heavens!" cried Mariana, stopping, and clasping her hands.

"To-morrow!" said Melanthe, as she disappeared from the room; but the tone in which she spoke was almost inaudible.

“ She is crazed,” said Mariana to herself. “ Ahi ! Ahi ! it is the Malocchio, the evil eye has struck her ; Malocchio maledetto ! That accursed stranger ;” and Mariana shook her hand towards the window where the figure had appeared. “ It was the Malocchio, that almost turned her to stone ; and I, Holy Virgin defend me, I too looked upon him, but I had the amulet blessed by Saint Rosalia ;” and Mariana drew from her gown a bunch of the little charms, without which no Neapolitan peasant thinks himself safe from the malice of the evil eye. She crossed herself, and seemed comforted.

A moment afterwards, Gennaro entered the apartment, and, unseen by Mariana, took up, and hastily concealed in his vest, the scroll which Melanthe had dropped upon the floor.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE morning had scarcely dawned, when Melanthe arose from her sleepless couch. From the hour when, on the previous evening, she had received the mysterious warning to desist in her endeavours to communicate with those who might protect her, one single idea had occupied the mind of Melanthe. It was the idea of Hassan—Hassan, who, if not her father, had always shown her a father's love, and to whom she therefore owed the duty and affection of a daughter, was the person on whom all her thoughts were now fixed. She thought of him, not as he had quitted her presence, full of hope that his journey would be crowned with success, and that the discovery of the abode of Elphenor, in restoring to him a friend, would also restore to her a father; but she pictured to herself

Hassan betrayed—imprisoned, and perhaps groaning in misery, under the hidden tyranny of the Cardinal.

From the moment when the repeated threat of a dungeon to any one who should befriend her, had suggested the idea of the detention of Hassan, her mind had known no rest; and reflection had confirmed the impression, until it seemed incomprehensible that it should not sooner have occurred to her that his prolonged absence could not be caused by accidental circumstances. One by one, she now recollected a variety of apparently inadvertent expressions, made use of by Borgia when speaking of the journey of Hassan, which at least proved that the Cardinal was more fully informed of the movements of the traveller than appeared natural. At first, she had scarcely remarked this; but, as the character of Borgia had gradually unfolded itself to her view, she had become aware of much that had formerly escaped, or been concealed from her observation. As the hope of gaining her affection had faded from the mind of the Cardinal, so had he freed himself from the restraint which

the semblance of virtue imposed upon him ; and he therefore unshrinkingly displayed to her eyes the villainy and unbridled profligacy more congenial to his nature.

The idea which Melanthe had conceived of his character, was sufficiently degrading, although ignorant of his excesses, or the depth of infamy into which his monstrous vices could sink him. Still she knew enough of his utter disregard of justice, or consequences, not to be aware, that, should it suit his purpose, the danger of an insult offered to a person so generally respected as Hassan was in Rome, would not be, in the eyes of Borgia, a circumstance of sufficient importance for consideration.

So firmly had the impression taken possession of her mind, of his having exercised violence for the purpose of detaining Hassan from his home, that she resolved to lose no time in endeavouring to ascertain the justness of her suspicions. By a fortunate coincidence of circumstances, the prisons of Rome were accessible to her ; and she forthwith determined to explore them, ere she carried her

researches further. Once assured that Hassan was not within their walls, she might depart from the city, could she contrive to do so unobserved ; and by making her way to some of the neighbouring towns, might find a refuge there, until she could discover where Montesecco was, and claim his protection. A sensation of relief entered the bosom of Melanthe, as she contemplated the possibility of escape from the spot polluted by the presence of her arch enemy the Cardinal ; yet the first step towards emancipation from her difficulties remained to be taken, for her generous heart refused to think only of herself, until assured that the safety of Hassan could in no way be affected by her departure.

Could she once succeed in quitting Rome, she fancied that the rage of the Cardinal would subside ; and, with it, all danger of persecution of her friends. Filled with these thoughts, Melanthe, on leaving her home, took her way towards the Castle of Saint Angelo ; and having reached it without danger, turned down a narrow lane, in which was the residence of the gaoler. She soon found the house ; but the light was still so feeble, that, fearful

of alarming the inmates, she waited for a few minutes before demanding admission.

The spot where she stood was familiar to her. It was not very long since she had visited it. Her errand had then been one of charity and kindness, of which Heaven had ordained she was now to reap the reward. Ramiro, the owner of the house, and principal gaoler of Saint Angelo, was brother to Stefano, the gardener of Hassan. Like the latter, he had had one daughter whom he cherished, but whose loss had left him comfortless upon the earth. It was by the death-bed of this only daughter that he had first seen and known Melanthe; and touched by the tenderness which she manifested towards his dying child, and the generosity with which she ministered to her wants and the caprices of illness, Ramiro had sworn, with the fervour of an excitable disposition, so natural to those of his sunny land, that no service or aid should ever be required of him by Melanthe, whether for herself, or in behalf of those dear to her, that he would not willingly perform, even were his life to become the sacrifice of his devotion.

At the time of making this promise, Melanthe, apparently to him, was prosperous and happy ; but never, in the brightest days of her prosperity, had the heart of Ramiro warmed towards her with feelings of gratitude and devotion so ardent, as at the moment when, weeping and trembling, she stood beneath his humble roof, and poured forth her sorrow to his wondering ear.

Melanthe, in confiding to Ramiro the secret suspicion she entertained of the detention of Hassan, carefully abstained from mentioning the name of Borgia ; and with the true delicacy inseparable from good and gentle feeling, Ramiro not only forbore to inquire further into the mystery than she appeared willing to reveal, but also suppressed all avowal of the imminent danger to which he knew he must expose himself by granting her request, and introducing her, without authority from the Governor, within the precincts of the castle. Still he did not hesitate. “ What is it, thought he, if they do take my head for disobedience to their orders ? Gratitude is an order from God. And she comforted my dying child—my poor Lucia.

Ah ! well, she is gone, and Ramiro is alone in the world ; and the Signora she loved, and who so often bade me be comforted, now comes to me for help. She shall have it, and the spirit of my sweet Lucia will smile upon me from heaven !”

Thus reasoned poor Ramiro, as he thought of his much-loved daughter, and looked upon the angel face of Melanthe, which he had so often seen bending over the pillow of Lucia, while her lips murmured a prayer. The blessing of the father’s heart was about to bring forth its fruit ; and with a feeling almost of pride, Ramiro contemplated the danger to which his devotion might expose him. It caused him, however, no little pain to see the conviction which seemed to have taken possession of the mind of Melanthe, that within the walls of the prison lay the object of her search ; for better informed, than she appeared to be, of the tyrannical power which so often consigned the innocent to his care, he knew how slender was their chance of deliverance.

The person of Hassan being unknown to him, he could not, by her description, decide whether or

not he was an inmate of the dismal abode they were about to explore ; for the admittance of prisoners of importance was of such frequent occurrence, and conducted with so much secrecy, that there were many within the walls, whose faces were concealed from all but those who had special orders to visit them, being immured in dungeons, the doors of which were secured by keys in the possession of the Governor. Amongst these, it was possible that Hassan might be confined ; but to the eager inquiries of Melanthe, Ramiro could only answer, that, to the best of his belief, no prisoner had been committed to the secret dungeons within the time she stated to have elapsed since the disappearance of Hassan. Somewhat comforted by this assurance, Melanthe, still questioning Ramiro, followed his steps across the court, observing, with a shudder, that he carried in his hand a lighted lamp, although the sun had now risen in full splendour. The door closed behind them with a heavy swing, and Melanthe stood within the prison of the castle. Long and weary were the hours she spent in traversing its dungeons and its gloom ; and tears of

pity were scarcely dry upon her cheek as she passed from the cell of some unhappy wretch, who eagerly related the hardship of his case, imploring her intercession in his behalf, ere they gushed forth anew, as a tale still more deplorable met her ear, and the sense of powerless compassion struck her to the heart.

Yet, as she moved on, she often longed again to hear those voices and those prayers, for more than once, as, chilled and shuddering, she threaded her way through the winding passages, and the damp and murky air with which the lower vaults were filled, the stare of idiotcy, and the shriek of the maniac, told that reason had perished under the dismal horror which the flesh could still resist. Sometimes, a groan was the only answer to the cheering word which Ramiro ventured to bestow; but too often the silence with which this was received, made him shake his head, and froze the heart of Melanthe, for she felt in the presence of the dead.

Many of the secret dungeons were below the level of the Tiber, and the only light which ever

entered there was from two narrow loop-holes above the door, which opened to the passage, but which door Ramiro assured her he never recollected to have seen unlocked. Heart rending as was this intelligence, as it concerned the fate of the wretched occupants of these loathsome graves of the living, Melanthe felt comforted at having convinced herself that the abode of Hassan, at least, was not amongst them; and with a silent prayer that heaven would look down in its mercy upon those whom the hardness of man against man had reduced to such misery, Melanthe quitted the lower dungeons; and, as she ascended the rugged steps which led back to the light of day, she inquired if she had now seen all that the castle contained?

“All,” replied Ramiro, “except the southern tower; or, as we call it now, the Greek tower.”

“And why so?” asked Melanthe.

“Because all the prisoners are of that nation,” was the reply.

“My unhappy countrymen,” said Melanthe, with a sigh; “how long have they been confined here?”

“These many years,” replied Ramiro.

“ And their crime — what was it ?” continued Melanthe, interested for the fate of those who had belonged to her own land.

“ They conspired against the state, at least so it was said,” added Ramiro, with a shrug of his shoulders ; “ but the Signora can see them. Here are the cells, and there are all the names they had adopted. His Holiness the Pope ordered them to be written up over each door, as,” he said, “ if they happened to look out, they might find the consolation of philosophy. Such was the message that I heard delivered to them by the governor, the day they were admitted.”

The cruelty of this insult became instantly apparent to Melanthe ; for the cells were placed back to back, so as to preclude the possibility of the prisoners having a view of each other ; and, as she moved along, she beheld, by the faint light which streamed from the high and grated windows, above the passage, that each cell bore the name of one of the ancient philosophers.

“ That was their chief,” whispered Ramiro, as he pointed to one cell a little smaller than the rest, and over which Melanthe read the name of

“ Socrates.” “ And because he was a great man in his own country, his Holiness said he should be the least here ; and so he was brought to the prison upon a mule, with his hands tied behind him, and his face towards the tail, like a felon. I remember it as if it was but yesterday.”

Melanthe paused before the little window of the cell, and gazed upon the unhappy prisoner whom misfortune could not shelter from savage indignity. He was an old man ; but, as he rose, and looked from the window, Melanthe could see that his noble form was still unbent ; and the calm reflective brow, round which fell a profusion of silver hair, which, mingling with his long beard, descended nearly to his waist, was still unfurrowed, and told more of patient suffering than was visible upon the countenance of the prisoners in general.

Melanthe, struck by the classic beauty of his appearance, and deeply interested by the knowledge of his misfortunes, drew nearer still ; and a ray of hope lit up the old man’s face, as the unusual appearance of a stranger and a woman attracted his attention. How often had that crushed heart breathed words of resignation, and meekly bowing

over the tomb of its last hope, awaited the release of the spirit, as the end of all its woes, and now it needed but the shadow of a passing form to bring back thoughts of liberty and life!—What was there in the veiled and shrouded figure before him, that made his limbs tremble and his heart beat? He who had long since resigned himself to captivity and death, what was there, that should move him, but that the form was woman's form; and with that word, came thoughts of gentle tears, and pity, and release, for why should she seek to gaze upon his sorrow, if she had not come to save? And the resolution of years gave way before that one moment of hope; and even in that dark cell, the cheek of the miserable man reddened as he felt the weakness of human philosophy, when weighed against the strength of human affection! So strong was the sudden emotion which the appearance of Melanthe had excited, that he trembled as he heard the words she addressed to him, inquiring the reason of his detention?

“Lady!” he replied, “for years have I asked the same question; but in vain.”

“How?” said Melanthe. “You were not even made acquainted with the accusation against you?”

“Conspiracy was the word which sounded in my ears, as, hooted and insulted by the rabble, I, with my companions, was led hither. Conspiracy against the Pope, and destruction to the Roman State; these were the watch words which have consigned us, a poor company of strangers and of scholars, to darkness and to chains!”

“Scholars?” said Melanthe, inquiringly; “Greek scholars?”

“Yes, Lady! we were scholars, and we were Greeks. Driven from our happy land by the barbarous Turks, we fled hither for refuge. Lady, you who are happy—blest with kindred and with home—you cannot know the bitterness of the tears the outcast sheds, nor how heart leaps to heart when any of the same land meet in a foreign soil. Strangers no more! they are brothers—they are friends. And we were friends—brothers; yes, brothers—for we were Greek, and Greece was then no more. Our love and our learning was our all—and that we shared together; and hidden from

the world, we took the classic names of those whose deeds and words were evermore the theme of our discourse. The study of Philosophy was all our care; but despotism, whose footstool is ignorance, grew jealous of our labours; our meetings were pronounced seditious; and without warning or trial did we learn that henceforth the dungeon was to be our home. Strangers, and helpless, we were torn from the light of day—years have gone by - - - long—cruel years—and still we are here. Lady, you weep - - -”

“ I do,” said Melanthe, “ for your wrongs, and for my own. I, too, am Greek, and, like you, by all forgotten.”

“ It cannot be,” exclaimed the prisoner; “ and yet my heart foretold a coming joy. Forgive me, Lady—long years of misery have left me few words of courtesy; but I thank you for your tears; and when your steps have borne you hence, think of the old man’s cell, which for a moment has been gladdened by the presence of one, with whom, as coming from the land he loved, he has dared to claim kindred.”

The voice of the prisoner faltered, for the avowal of Melanthe that she belonged to his persecuted country, had destroyed the hope with which her presence had at first inspired him.

“ I have but little power,” said Melanthe; “ but I have the will to serve you—say, is there aught I may do ?”

“ Nothing,” replied the prisoner, sadly.

“ I have money—jewels ; I am rich,” suggested Melanthe.

“ Alas ! it would be useless. The wealth of our scattered nation would not buy our freedom. Our gaolers are the only ones not venal—bigotry and ignorance - - - But I thank you, Lady,” added the unhappy prisoner, changing his tone from the despondency to which it had sunk, “ I thank you ; and if, indeed, you would give a poor prisoner a moment’s solace from his woes, I have a request that I would make to you ;—and yet I dare not.”

“ Speak,” said Melanthe, eagerly ; “ I will gladly do all you may require.”

“ Lady, it is a foolish fancy ; but I would fain

see the features of the only being who for years has spoken kindly to me. The light is dim—I cannot see your face.”

Melanthe turned ; and taking up the lamp which, at her request, Ramiro had left at a distance during her conversation with the prisoner, she placed it on the ledge of the window, in order that its light might fall upon her features, and then threw back the hood and veil which she had hitherto worn. The light streamed upon her face, and the old man smiled with a melancholy expression as he looked upon her beauty ; but ere long the change which was apparent in the countenance of the prisoner was so alarming, that Melanthe could not for an instant withdraw her eyes from it. The little hue of life which long confinement had left upon his cheek faded away, while his large dark eyes seemed to dilate to an unnatural size, as he gazed upon the figure before him, and scanned every feature with an intensity unaccountable to her.

Suddenly his eye caught the glitter of the jewelled cross, which Melanthe, imagining that

without some bribe of sufficient value she might not perhaps be able to effect her purpose of exploring the prisons, had hung round her neck.

Without speaking, the prisoner passed his hand through the bars of his cell, and brought the cross nearer to his view.

“ It was my mother’s,” said Melanthe, sadly.

“ Her name ?” asked the prisoner, in a hoarse voice ; and his hand trembled, so that the cross fell from it.

“ Ida !” replied Melanthe, hurriedly, for a thought suddenly struck her.

“ Melanthe—my child ! I felt it,” cried the prisoner, as he fell senseless against the wall of his cell.

“ My father !”—said Melanthe, sinking on her knees before him. She was not deceived—it was Elphenor who had spoken !

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IT was almost dark before the kind-hearted Ramiro returned that day to separate the father from the child ; and, as he entered the cell which contained them, his heart, while it swelled with the remembrance of his own bereavement, which the sight of their happiness called forth, blessed also the fortunate chance which had thus enabled him to discharge his debt of gratitude to Melanthe. The joy of Elphenor was the joy of one whose pent-up affections were at last permitted to overflow ; and the emotion his countenance betrayed was strangely at variance with its usual stately calm. The sternness of the sage was gone—*the father* shone in its place. And Melanthe,—surely her sorrows were now ended !—She had found her father, and she looked up in his face, while one

bright smile chased another ; and her hand clasped that of Elphenor, as if never to relax its hold.

Little remained for her to learn of his hard fate, beyond what the first words of the prisoner had taught her. For some years after his flight from Constantinople he had lived comparatively in obscurity, until the persecution which arose against all men of letters, had involved him in their common ruin ; and the Academy which they had founded, and of which he was the head, was denounced as a cover for seditious meetings, dangerous to the state, and its members condemned to perpetual imprisonment.

At first, many efforts had been made, both by the prisoners themselves, and those interested for them, to obtain the remission of a sentence so unjust ; but the first attempts having failed, time passed on, and with it disappeared many of those, whose zeal in the cause of the unhappy Greeks might have proved of service to them. Other circumstances and interests then arose, until the fate of the prisoners, and even their existence, ceased to be remembered in Rome.

With tearful eyes Melanthe listened to this sad

history ; but Elphenor, wild with the joy that glowed in his bosom, forbore to dwell unnecessarily upon the sorrows of his past life, though eagerly demanding from his daughter a full recital of every circumstance relating to her own. With what fervour did the now happy father call down blessings upon the head of Hassan, the preserver of his child ; but sadly he listened to the account of poor Gennaro—the child of Demetrius and the beautiful Chezmé. How did the heart of Elphenor long for the presence of the two persons, whose existence seemed to connect his own with the past—Hassan and Gennaro—the friends—the protectors of his daughter ; and again and again did he make Melanthe repeat everything which she had already told him, as though he could scarcely believe that all was not illusion. And Melanthe, in her turn, would question him, and weep as he spoke of Ida, the mother whose memory she revered, and whose dreadful fate she now first learned.

Thus in smiles and in tears, in present rapture, and in remembrance of past grief, the father and daughter spent the first day of their re-union ; and when the voice of Ramiro awakened them from

their trance of delight, they started, as they remembered that as yet no plan for attempting the release of Elphenor had been determined between them. Various suggestions were now hastily offered ; but to all some objection appeared, until at length Ramiro, who had not hitherto taken any part in the discussion, interposed.

“ It is of no use,” he said ; “ a petition to the Pope will do nothing. Hundreds have gone from hence—I myself have borne them—laid them at the feet of his Holiness, and all in vain—no answer ever was returned ! ”

“ Then what shall we do ? Good Ramiro, counsel us,” exclaimed Melanthe, who in her joy had overlooked this difficulty.

“ I know not how to advise,” replied Ramiro ; “ but this I do know, that there is but one man in Rome, who can persuade the Pope to anything.”

“ And who is he ? ” inquired Elphenor ; “ though indeed so many years have passed since I have heard a name, I scarce could know the man of whom you speak.”

“ I speak of one, of whom all men speak,” answered Ramiro ; “ and I say as they do, that the

Pope may be head of the Church, but that the Cardinal Borgia is head of Rome. Without him, nothing is done; and did his Holiness command the prison doors to open, one word from the Cardinal would close them, and for ever."

"We must gain him to our side," said Elphenor. "Surely he is just—he will listen to our prayer. Melanthe, thou wilt seek this good man - - - but what ails thee, my child?" he added, in a voice of alarm, as he marked the sudden change that came over the countenance of his daughter.

"Nothing, father," said Melanthe, faintly.

"My child!" exclaimed Elphenor, catching her in his arms; "she is faint—see how she trembles."

"No, it is past now," said Melanthe, struggling to appear calm, though the deadly terror of the view which had thus suddenly opened to her, had almost deprived her of her senses. "It is nothing; but after so much joy, this difficulty - - -" She paused, and Elphenor rejoined,

"We must not look upon it as such. To know that there is a person who can save us, is much. Doubtless, this Holy man will be our friend—his

calling is of justice and mercy. My child, thou wilt seek him."

"Father, oh! no!" exclaimed Melanthe, involuntarily.

"How? you refuse?" said Elphenor, in astonishment; "Melanthe!"

"No, no," interrupted Melanthe; "I meant not what I said; but is there no other way?"

"None so nearly certain of success," interposed Ramiro. "Take my advice," he continued, as he turned to Elphenor, "persuade the Signora to go herself; petitions are of no use; the Pope never sees them: and besides," he added, as a recollection of the gross infringement of prison discipline of which he had been guilty in admitting Melanthe, came to him, "if things are not properly represented, we may all get into trouble; and the Signora, with her soft words, will explain it all much better than a long piece of writing could do. So she had better go at once, before it gets to the ear of his Eminence in any other way."

"Every word of the honest and well-intentioned amiro, struck deeply into the heart of Melanthe;

and she shuddered as she contemplated the alternative to which she was thus cruelly reduced.

“ You hear his words,” said Elphenor, when Ramiro had ceased speaking. “ My child, will you not help me ? ”

The touching distress with which this was uttered, overcame the unhappy girl ; and she threw herself sobbing upon the bosom of her father, who, imagining that the fear of failure was the cause of her agitation, endeavoured by the most soothing arguments, in which he constantly dwelt upon the good qualities with which his fancy had invested Borgia, to comfort and re-assure her—until, writhing beneath his words, she distractedly exclaimed,

“ Father, dear father ! I will go to the Cardinal ! ” and tearing herself from the arms of Elphenor, quitted the prison.

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